

# Sinners Down the Centuries



Philip Beaufoy Barry

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# SINNERS DOWN THE CENTURIES

FROM CLEOPATRA TO CORA PEARL  
& FROM OVID TO EDMUND KEAN

69 B.C.—A.D. 1886

*By*

PHILIP BEAUFOY BARRY

AUTHOR OF

"TWELVE MONSTROUS CRIMINALS," "SECRET POWER," ETC.

"Soles occidere et redire possunt,  
Nobis cum semel occedit brevis lux,  
Nox est perpetua una dormienda."

CATULLUS

1929

MACRAE SMITH COMPANY

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THE BARGE OF CLEOPATRA



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## INTRODUCTION

**I** THINK it was Balzac who said that sin is perhaps the outcome of a desire to know and feel everything. That Goethe may also have held this view is probably proved by his treatment of the "Faust" legend wherein the passion of the old Faust for esoteric knowledge is interwoven with the passion of the young Faust for a woman.

It is conceivable that the sinner is a person who instinctively and despairingly realizes the briefness of life and wishes to cheat himself into an illusion of prolongation and intensity by a series of experiments with the senses. Recognizing, consciously or sub-consciously, that things felt are more vital than things read or seen, he plunges into sensation and gains (or fancies that he gains) the heart of life. He stretches out his arms to enfold all life—all experience—and he clutches instead the form of a woman.

The life of what may be called the "professional amorist" alternates between despair and delirium. The despair is crystallized in the lines of Omar when he speaks of "One Moment in Annihilation's waste—One Moment of the Well of Life to taste." For lovers are always fearing the briefness of love.

One fact, if none other, emerges from the study of the supreme sinners of history. We realize that there are certain men and women who must, of necessity, fulfil themselves by a series of erotic adventures and experiences. Without those adventures and emotions, they would, perhaps, die of inanition.

We may claim, at least, for the people of this record that they did not sin against the light. I think that the sinners against the light are those persons who are deliberately and purposelessly cruel—those who by means of false theology make death a fearsome thing—and, above

all, those who hate beauty and twist life into ugly shapes.

Our sinners held themselves free from these things. They sinned against a convention rather than against a fundamental law of life. And, if one more word must be said in their favour, let it be said that history would furnish gloomy reading indeed had not the sinners of the world provided a little scandal to relieve the long litany of woe that forms the dominant chorus of unhappy humanity.

PHILIP BEAUFOY BARRY

LONDON, 1928



# Sinners down the Centuries

## Cleopatra

(69 B.C.—30 B.C.)

**T**HE average person—our dear friend “the man in the street”—probably thinks of old Alexandria as an Egyptian city and of Cleopatra as an Egyptian woman. Both impressions are misleading. It is true, of course, that Alexandria is geographically Egyptian—true, likewise, that Cleopatra was born in that city and was a descendant of a long line of rulers who were associated with Egypt from the conquest by Alexander the Great. But Alexandria of the year 69 B.C. was essentially a Greek city and Cleopatra was pure Greek by birth, by training, by education and by spiritual tendencies.

The name “Alexandria” indeed indicates the Greek origin. Alexander, having conquered that wealthy land, established on the throne a favourite general, and thus did the Ptolemy dynasty begin.

Let it be said at once that the writer has no intention of dealing in detail with the domestic and international politics of the period. Those episodes must of necessity enter for a moment into the narrative, but it is with Cleopatra as woman and lover rather than with Cleopatra as diplomatist and politician that this record deals.

She was born in Alexandria in 69 B.C., but the exact date seems to have escaped the historian. She was the eldest daughter of the 13th Ptolemy—sometimes called Ptolemy Auletes because he was a clever flute-player.

This accomplishment appears to have been his one claim to amiability. In all other respects, he was probably as complete a ruffian as his predecessors.

The childhood and early youth of Cleopatra were spent in the great palace at Alexandria, a place that was also a fortress. Her intelligence, her quickness to learn were amazing. Before she had reached the age of fourteen, she spoke several languages. Indeed, Plutarch, who in spite of his bias for Rome seems to have had a decided liking for Cleopatra, speaks of her as "a many-tongued instrument" and added that "she did never need an interpreter." That she was a person of extraordinary adaptability in the affairs of life as well as in matters of the tongue, we may feel certain. This gift (a characteristic of Greek races) must have aided her considerably in the subsequent intrigues.

Marcus Antoninus (called, in English, Marc Antony) saw Cleopatra for the first time when she was a girl of fourteen. He was serving as a cavalry officer in a Roman Expeditionary force. Much space would be needed to explain in detail how and why Roman forces found themselves in Egypt at that period, but it may be said briefly that the methods of Rome in regard to smaller Powers were in some ways akin to our own. She would frequently offer help during internecine or foreign troubles. Having firmly wedged herself in by means of loans and services, she would sometimes (when opportunity served) establish what would to-day be called a Protectorate or Suzerainty. It was not the fault of Rome if annexation did not follow at a later time, providing such annexation seemed a sound investment.

It is said that no speech passed between these future lovers on that occasion at Alexandria. It is possible that



Antony merely saw the girl for a moment, but fourteen years later he called to mind the meeting and sent for her to come to him at Tarsus. Much, however, remains to be set down before the record touches that historic and far-reaching encounter.

\* \* \*

In the year 58, Ptolemy Auletes fled hurriedly from his native land. He was in danger of his life, for his people were bitterly enraged by the Roman annexation of the island of Cyprus, at which act the king had undoubtedly connived, yielding to tempting bribes. After his flight, Cleopatra Tryphæa (a wife or daughter—perhaps both !) reigned until her death. She was succeeded for a very short space by Berenike, a sister of the Cleopatra of our story.

Rome, anxious to stand by the exiled Ptolemy, continued to adopt his cause. A strong force marched from Gaza under the leadership of Gabinius, Governor of Syria. Archelaos, the husband of Berenike, was killed, and the fugitive Ptolemy was restored to his throne. Two years later he caused Berenike to be murdered. He feared, doubtless, that having tasted power, she might be tempted to seek the throne for the second time. He was gracious enough to spare the lives of his other children, Cleopatra, Arsinoe and the two infant boys, on the grounds that they had been too young to share in Berenike's rebellion.

In the month of June 51, Cleopatra became ruler of Egypt on the death of Ptolemy, her father. She reigned in accordance with custom with her young brother, Ptolemy the 14th, as consort. This joint rule must have frequently led to many complications. Partnerships are

always more or less difficult associations—the difficulty in the case of Egypt, at that time beset by all sorts and conditions of complications, was probably appalling.

Very soon, brother and sister were quarrelling, and open hostility followed as a matter of course. In the year 48 Cleopatra was actually flying from Egypt, pursued by her young brother's army. The boy, a true son of his ruffianly father, wished to have absolute and undivided rule. Pompey arrived in Egypt from Rome, was murdered by his command, the crime being accompanied by circumstances of the vilest treachery.

A few days after the murder of the great Pompey, Julius Cæsar himself arrived in Alexandria in order to visit his ally, the youthful Ptolemy. And here we have our first glimpse of Cleopatra as a brilliant and swift diplomatist. With the instinct of the fighter, she realized that the first blow, if properly given, is often the most effective. She must lose no time in winning Cæsar. But how was this to be done? The palace was surrounded by her brother's troops—that amiable youth would certainly not have hesitated to see her killed.

She hit upon an ingenious trick. Having hidden herself (she was no great size, slender and sinuous) in a bed-sack or mattress, Cleopatra was carried on the shoulders of two slaves into the palace. Before her brother could intervene, she had flung herself at the feet of Cæsar and laughingly disclosed her admirable figure, clothed so sparsely that the eyes of Julius were instantly intrigued.

There was genius in this trick. She had read or heard of Cæsar's tendencies—knew that he was the sort of man who would be more impressed by the trick of a mummer than the majesty of a queen making a fitting entrance. For this Cæsar was essentially a vain man, trivial-minded



in all things except where his ambitions were concerned. Every morning he was carefully perfumed—his face was painted—his hair (scanty and poor) artfully dyed. He was an amorist always—his love affairs would have filled many pages of his Commentaries had he cared to record them—a cold-blooded seducer; he probably caused a great deal of unhappiness as he fought his way towards an immortality which perhaps he hardly deserves.

We are told that Cæsar fell in love with the young Cleopatra on the instant. Dion Cassius, a fairly reliable authority, writes that “he became her slave, attracted by her voice as well as by her beauty.”

The night was spent in revelry. Towards dawn Cæsar (by this time probably having had a passage of some kind with Cleopatra) sent for Ptolemy and tried to bring about a reconciliation between brother and sister.

The behaviour of the boy was characteristic. A coward like his father, he fell back upon the eternal cry of all cowards: “We have been betrayed!” . . . He rushed from the palace. Calling on the people assembled at the gates, he shouted that they had been sold to Rome by his sister. Then, mad with rage and fear, he tore from his head the crown, trampled it, and behaved in so wild a way that certain officers of Cæsar secured him lest he should harm himself or other people.

In the subsequent fighting, the famous Alexandrian Library, with its 400,000 books, was burned. The larger part of the volumes of Euclid were in that library. One imagines that the modern schoolboy, faced with the quite respectable number that survived, has reason to bless the fire that robbed him of a longer ordeal. . . .

Battle followed battle. Eventually the boy Ptolemy was drowned whilst trying to escape. On the 27th of

March, 47, Julius marched in triumph through the streets of Alexandria. The terrified people threw themselves on his mercy.

Cæsar, true to the Roman tradition (sustained only when it suited their political expediencies), behaved admirably. Here again we see Anglo-Saxon methods. It was invariably the custom of the Roman conquerors to leave a nation its own laws and customs; provided peace was kept and that tribute was regularly paid, the inhabitants of a conquered province had little to fear. Cæsar, having established his authority, at once reassured the people and promised them his protection and indulgence.

Now, at this time, there was no definite idea of annexation on the part of Rome. It is possible that the authorities at headquarters did not desire at that stage to saddle themselves with a turbulent Egypt. It was sufficient for them at the time to "sit on the fence" and await further developments.

The first act of Cæsar was to raise the younger Ptolemy (a boy of eleven) to the throne, to reign as consort with Cleopatra. Julius had now ended for the moment his mission in Egypt. There was no necessity for him to remain beyond the necessity that appealed to him, perhaps, far more strongly than any political or ambitious urge. For by this time, there is no doubt that Cleopatra had gained a tremendous hold upon his body and his brain. She appealed to both. She had realized from the outset that here was a man whom mere sensual delights would never content for more than a brief space. She brought herself to fling into the encounter wit, flattery, and a hundred subtle intellectual things.

For nine months Cæsar remained in Egypt. He explored the country with his gay companion, gaining



information, says a historian, and at the same time "enjoying himself in other ways."

The travels were done in great pomp. An escort of 400 ships accompanied the travellers. Cleopatra throughout those voyages must have been a very wonderful companion. She was probably a good "raconteuse"—and what was even more useful in the case of a man of Cæsar's type, a very excellent listener.

There came the day at length when he could no longer tread the primrose path in Egypt. He was wanted in Syria, but apart from this fact, there may have been some weariness on his part. It is true that we have been told of Cleopatra that "age could not wither her nor custom stale her infinite variety," but it is conceivable that Julius, a general lover, was growing anxious for new conquests.

\* \* \*

In the month of June 47, he said good-bye to his mistress and went to Syria, leaving three legions as a guard. Soon afterwards, his child Cæsarion was born. A difficulty arose in connection with the infant. Rome was naturally unpopular in Egypt—Cleopatra realized that the people would resent the possibility of a child of Cæsar ruling over them at some future time.

The priests (always the good friends of monarchs in a difficulty) came to her aid. They invented and circulated a story of a miraculous birth. It was given out that the God Amon-Ra had visited the Queen, and that the child was the result of their union. It was hardly a plausible tale, for the name "Cæsarion" certainly savoured of Julius rather than of Amon, but the legend was accepted, and the people were apparently satisfied.

During the two years that passed after the departure

of Julius, we hear little of Cleopatra, but about 45, we find her at Rome, where the friendship with Cæsar was renewed. She was lodged in his villa on the Tiber. Roman society accepted the Queen of Egypt with outward enthusiasm. Secretly, it despised her as it despised all foreigners. An Imperial race rarely has much respect for alien peoples.

On the 15th of March, of the following year, Julius Cæsar left his house and went to the Senate. Cleopatra did not see him alive again. He had been warned by magicians that the Ides of March would be for him a dangerous day—but his belief in himself and in his star had prevailed. He had reached a point when he fancied himself almost a god—beyond human weapons. The conspiracy planned by Marcus Brutus and Caius Cassius succeeded, and he was stabbed to death.

Immediately after the assassination, Cleopatra tried to leave Rome, realizing that her position was dangerous. However, it was not until the following month that she was enabled to return to her own country. The country had been thrown into chaos—it is possible that the sailings of vessels were affected by the general disorder.

Of her young brother and consort, Ptolemy, who had accompanied her to Italy, we know nothing further, for at this point history has been silent. Certain haters of Cleopatra (and the majority of the historians were entirely pro-Roman and anti-Egyptian) have suggested that the Queen brought about his death. It is quite probable. Human life was very cheap before Christianity gave it a spiritual value. Cleopatra ordering the killing of a dozen people would perhaps have felt no more qualm than a modern judge ordering six months' imprisonment.



We must remember these matters if we wish to get the proper focus on the old world.

\* \* \*

On her return to Alexandria, Cleopatra ruled in conjunction with her baby son Cæsarion as consort. This arrangement doubtless suited her well. It is probable that she realized her strength and her talents—and knew that she could wield the reins of government without any assistance.

If we are to understand this woman, we must realize one thing firmly—Cleopatra from first to last was dominated by love of country and desire of power. The fear that Egypt might slip away from the Ptolemaic dynasty and become a province of Rome must have been her day-and-night obsession. To avert that appalling possibility, she was ready to sell her body—and to make any sacrifice.

And indeed, Egypt was worth a fight. It was a land of inexhaustible wealth, of innumerable and cunning manufactures, its people were hard-working, docile, intelligent. Alexandria itself was an amazing city with its blended populations of 300,000 people. Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Jews, Phœnicians, and a dozen other races intermingled. Marriages between Greek and Egyptian were frequent—a new race possessing characteristics of its own was being slowly evolved.

It is easy to imagine Cleopatra contemplating this treasure-land of hers and resolving to hold it for herself. It must have galled her to receive peremptory orders from Rome to furnish assistance in the civil war that had broken out after the killing of Julius. She refused to obey the command, and thus incurred the resentment of

the young Octavian (nephew of Cæsar), who, in conjunction with Marc Antony, was warring upon the forces led by the revolutionary party of Marcus Brutus and Caius Cassius.

The war was finished by the decisive battle of Philippi. Brutus and Cassius were defeated, and they died, after the Roman fashion, on their own swords. Octavian and his friend Antony had now gained a triumph that probably outran their most vivid ambitions.

\* \* \*

At this time, Marc Antony was a little over forty years of age. He was tall, well-set-up, handsome—the ideal soldier in appearance and in bearing. Philippi and its success did not prove good for him. He was flattered, fawned upon, regarded almost as a god. This worship, this flattery caught the man on his weakest side. His passions, always turbulent, uncontrolled, got the better of him, and the first seed of decay was sown.

Nevertheless, he was (one imagines) a very lovable sort of man, this Antony. He could drink with the stoutest drinker—was generous beyond belief—courageous (of course), and splendidly forgiving. Imagine the typical Irish character with all its virtues and all its weaknesses joined to the Stoic steel of the Roman, and we have a portrait of Marc Antony as he must have seemed to Cleopatra when they met for the second time at Tarsus.

It is a truism to say that many of the world's most far-reaching events have been born of trivial things. It was a very trifling matter that brought about the meeting of Antony and Cleopatra.

It happened thus. After his victory at Philippi, Antony had been delighted to receive the homage of many rulers



of small States. Cleopatra, however, had failed to render him this homage. He resolved to exact from her this homage, and to that end a messenger was despatched to fetch the Queen to him at Tarsus.

A scandalmonger of the time has suggested that the messenger, Delliüs, had a flitting love-passage with the Queen of Egypt en route. It is quite conceivable. One can hardly believe that Cleopatra in the interval between her love affairs with Cæsar and with Antony lived an austere life. Like her ancestors, she was doubtless inordinately erotic. The Egyptian of to-day is not exactly a Saint Anthony. Byron has hinted that where the sun is warm, the natives follow its example. . . . We may feel tolerably certain that Cleopatra was a child of the sun !

The Queen was enchanted at the prospect of meeting the successful Antony. At once she saw in the proposed meeting a new method of gaining the goodwill of Rome. She realized, of course, that the conqueror of Philippi was now a very important person. A little flattery—a little love-making—and he might be won to her side. The integrity of her loved Egypt would remain unbroken.

Immediately she set out for Cilicia in magnificent array. Shakespeare has described the voyage. One historian writes :

“ The vessel sailed up the river with gilded stern and silver oars, moving in time to the music of harps, flutes and pipes. Cleopatra, decked like unto Aphrodite in a picture, lay beneath an awning that was spangled with golden stars. Beautiful young boys painted to resemble Cupids with gilded wings, stood and fanned her. At the helm and rigging, there were lovely slaves in the guise of Nereids and Graces. The river banks were filled with the perfumes wafted from the barge. . . . ”

Antony, we are told, loved her as his eyes first fell upon her half-nude body. Love affairs in the East travelled swiftly then, as they travel now, and there was no elaborate wooing. She came to him as she had come to Cæsar. Thus did this love-story, made valuable perhaps by its far-reaching political significance rather than by its inherent romance, begin, and the lines that follow will show how it blackened to its end.

\* \* \*

From first to last, it was a hectic business. So entirely was Antony obsessed by his passion that he allowed her to arrange many things as she chose. Cleopatra, quick to realize that she was now in a position when she could do no wrong, decided to remove her sister Arsinoe, who might easily become a dangerous rival.

After the episode of Arsinoe's murder, Cleopatra, well satisfied, gave herself to Antony with redoubled joy. They spent days and nights in erotic adventures. She invented for him (it is said) new and amazing delights. That she knew and practised every trick of the courtesan we may feel tolerably certain. Between Cleopatra of the last century before our own era and the Cora Pearl of the nineteenth century, there is perhaps only the gap of time and the gap of circumstance. The bait in the one case was Egypt—in the other case, money. The accompanying tricks were doubtless on lines of intense similarity. Of all persons, the courtesan is the most whole-heartedly and intensely conservative !

\* \* \*

Octavian in Rome was horrified. He said that Antony was "bewitched." It would be interesting to have



heard the cold-blooded Octavian air his views on the "liaison." No woman on earth could have held the future Augustus from the expediency of the hour for one instant! He was a self-conscious, self-righteous person, happy in the hour of his birth. He succeeded, too, because he was dominated by his reason and not by his emotions.

Antony, on the other hand, overcome by emotion, was behaving very badly. He had deserted his wife Fulvia. Her letters speaking of their children and of domestic sorrows he left unanswered. Rome now seemed to him a far-off, vague place. Egypt had got a hold on him that was destined never to be relaxed.

They needed him at Rome, where the political situation was now very difficult, but he remained with Cleopatra. He amused himself with the childish things that please infatuated men who, in middle-age, yield to an absorbing passion.

Money was plentiful. It was a new experience for Antony, usually whelmed in debt, to find unlimited resources ready to his hand. The riches of his mistress enabled him to indulge every absurd fancy that came to his brain.

\* \* \*

It was a life of extravagance run mad. They did strange things. . . . Once, at a feast, Cleopatra wagered Antony that she would spend 10 million sesterces during the evening. Antony having scoffed at the suggestion, she at once took from her ear a cluster of pearls and flung the stones into a jar of vinegar that they might dissolve. The judge chosen to decide the bet was just in time to hold back the Queen from sacrificing a second cluster. (The amount of 10 million sesterces would rank in

our own money values at an approximate sum of £90,000 !)

Perhaps, however, there was a certain method in this madness. Probably she wished to impress upon Antony the reality of her wealth and power so that he might be led to join forces with herself rather than with his natural ally in Rome. (This is mere conjecture on the part of the writer—it has not been suggested by the historians of the period—but one imagines that it may explain a wildness of behaviour hardly consistent with the acknowledged intelligence and expediency-seeking wisdom of this extraordinary woman.)

Antony was always with her. She went with him everywhere—to entertainments—to museums—to the streets of Alexandria at night. Disguised as slaves, these two people would seek adventure and frequently found it.

Throughout these diversions, Cleopatra must have been eternally anxious. Always there must have lingered a fear concerning the future of Egypt. "How long shall I be able to hold Antony?" she must have asked herself, over and over again. One pictures her not as ruler amusing herself with a lover-slave, but rather as a desperate woman, putting forth every amorous trick, every gambol of wit, every hard effort of body and spirit to keep within her arms the man who might yet stand between her Egypt and the grip of Rome!

Probably she despised Antony a little. His vanity was often absurd. He did childish things. He prided himself on his skill as a fisherman, but was rarely successful in catching fish. Once, when a great angling festival was taking place, Antony, vexed by previous failures, paid divers to go down below the river and affix his lines to fishes. Then, smiling with the joy of the successful



fisherman, he would haul up his "catch." When the trick became known, it was not resented by the crowd, who rather enjoyed its ingenuous ingenuity.

Cleopatra, with subtle cajolery, told Antony that he was a fool to concern himself with fishing. "Leave such things to us," she is reported to have said. "Your appointed sport is continents and Kings."

\* \* \*

Before the beginning of the year 40, the triumvirate of Octavian, Antony, and Lepidus was a triumvirate only in name, for by this time Antony was more or less estranged from both. But early in that year, he seems to have roused himself from his debauches, coming, as Plutarch says, "like a man from a drunken sleep." He left Alexandria and went to Greece.

We know little of what happened at the parting of the lovers. One may imagine, however, that her agitation was great. What would happen to him—how would her memory fare with him when once again he was with his friends, restored to responsibility and to a sense of Roman values?

At Athens, he met his wife Fulvia. There was a terrible scene. It is probable that she reproached him with ingratitude as well as with infidelity, for she had helped him much in the earlier days with money and with influence. They parted, and soon afterwards Fulvia died at Sikyon.

The death of Fulvia removed from the path of Cleopatra a rival—not a strong rival, perhaps, but, one that, living, had to be estimated. Presently, however, the Queen saw with bitterness that there was small cause for satisfaction. For this death served to bring about a reconciliation

between Antony and Octavian—the latter probably seeing in Antony a potential husband for his sister Octavia. The hopes of the future Augustus were satisfied. Antony married Octavia. Four years passed. He lived with his wife happily. It seemed as though the separation from Cleopatra would endure unbroken.

“*Dis aliter visum.*” It happened that on his way to invade Parthia, Antony and his forces found themselves in Syria. That land woke memories of Egypt. His passion was reborn. Immediately he sent a messenger to fetch the Queen. Since his absence, two children, twin children, had been born to her, of whom Antony was the father. That link, perhaps, meant little to her, but she could not afford to lose an opportunity of regaining the man who might aid her ambitions concerning her country. She came to him joyously, and the association was renewed.

His wife in Rome soon heard of Antony’s default. She made tremendous efforts to get him to return to her. Cleopatra, fearing that Antony might yield, feigned illness—said that she believed she was on the point of death. Antony remained !

At this point of his career, Marc Antony seems to have revived somewhat. Perhaps his life in Rome with the well-ordered and placid Octavia—the influence of his friends—and the rehabilitation of his shattered body by exercise and military interests—brought about this semi-renaissance. So admirably did he quit himself that he triumphed everywhere during his campaign in the East. That campaign was crowned by the conquest of Armenia.

Cleopatra did not go with him, but seems to have remained at home, amusing herself with artistic diversions.



One of these diversions was the building and decorating of temples. She loved any work that was flamboyant.

Later, at Antioch, she joined Antony, and during that period it has been held by some that she went through a ceremony of marriage with her lover. The evidence, however, is in the main against this assumption. Antony would hardly have been rash enough to enrage Octavian by this insult to his sister. The belief may have arisen from the fact that a coin struck in Egypt in the year 32 B.C. bore the image of Antony. But is not it conceivable that Antony, now regarding himself as the partial sovereign of the country, ordered the striking of the coin in a mad or drunken moment ?

They said of him in Rome that his ruin was now complete. Since his triumph in Armenia, he had been drinking heavily. It was said that Cleopatra likewise drank to excess, but that she retained her outward calmness by means of magic. One can hardly believe, however, that so level-headed a woman was foolish enough to dissipate thus with any kind of consistency. She was too anxious to maintain her self-control—too anxious regarding the fate of her country. But that Antony went fuddled to bed every night is more than possible.

One historian wrote of him that he had by this time sunk so low that he had forgotten his name, his country, his reputation. And so it was ! He was becoming effeminate and soft—was adorning himself with jewels, singing lewd songs, dancing lewd dances.

What had happened to him ? One fancies that after Armenia there was reaction. Antony at this point began, perhaps, to be swayed by two emotions—first an emotion of humiliation born of the knowledge that he had gone down to the depths and could never quite recover himself

—and, secondly, an emotion of slavish adoration for his mistress.

She had begun by tempting him intellectually and physically ; one cannot but fancy that at the end, she held him by the bodily impulse and by none other. If she had bidden him go down on hands and knees and crawl at her feet, he would have obeyed. A happy state this for a Roman of his breed and rank—a Roman who in other circumstances might have displaced the unsympathetic Octavian and ruled the Empire, as the first of the Antonines.

\* \* \*

And now, three years of life remained to the two of our record. In the year 33 B.C., it seemed tolerably certain that civil war between Rome and the East must presently break out. Letters passed between Antony and Octavian—letters packed with insults and obscenities. It was a custom of those times when people were enraged to use invective of a sort which would to-day be regarded as objectionable by the foulest-mouthed tavern-loafers. The spectacle of the future Augustus—Augustus the patron of the arts—the friend of Virgil and Horace—writing letters made up of snarls and dirt, is not pleasing, but “*autres temps—autres mœurs !*” Octavian, like many self-righteous people, could be very disagreeable when he chose. He chose now to heap insults on his former friend and ally—and Antony returned the compliments in full measure.

One wonders how the man felt in those days when he must clearly have seen his destiny closing in upon him. Did he lie awake sometimes during those hot Egyptian nights and ask himself whether the game had been worth playing—Did he sometimes think of the Rome from



which he was now cut off—of the men whom he had known and loved—of the ambition that was now falling from him like a worn-out cloak ?

Had we looked into the brain of the Queen at that time, we would probably have seen triumphant imaginings, for everything was going as she had planned. She had gained a firm hold on Antony ; his success in the East had been complete. With his help, not only might she retain Egypt, but might gain conquests abroad. At this time it is probable she was a very happy woman. But not for long !

In 32 B.C. matters began to move towards war. Whilst Antony was staying with Cleopatra at Ephesus, there came to him envoys from Rome with messages from Octavian. Antony sent them home with words that enraged Octavian so deeply that preparations for attack were speedily begun.

Antony, fearful lest Cleopatra should be involved in warfare touching the city where both of them were staying, begged her to return to Alexandria. She refused, and this refusal prejudiced matters for him to a very great extent. For Cleopatra, abandoning her tactful measures, behaved so badly to his friends that many of them were alienated and went over to the Octavian party.

However, these desertions were balanced in some ways by desertions from Rome to the army of Antony. Eventually a great Antonine force was assembled, swelled by many legions from Eastern dependencies.

No decisive attack had yet been made on either side. In the meantime, Antony, apparently careless of the future, went with his mistress to Samos, where the two revelled morning and night, exactly as they had revelled in the early days of their friendship.

The outbreak of war was probably hastened by a domestic episode. For Antony, infatuated with the Queen, probably imagined that a deliberate insult to his wife Octavia would please that person. He therefore caused his stewards to drive Octavia from his house at Rome. One can imagine how Octavian regarded this outrage on his sister. If anything could have driven him to war, it was this last offence.

\* \* \*

The first encounter took place on the 31st of March, 31. For five months the position remained practically unchanged. There were small victories, small defeats on both sides.

The story of the last campaign of Antony cannot be told here in detail. Much must be overlooked. The climax came at sea. The battle of Actium, one of the decisive battles of the old world, was fought between two tremendous navies, on the 2nd of September, 31.

Self-preservation was always a guiding force with Cleopatra. She watched the fight from her flagship, and during its progress she probably scented a speedy defeat. Without consultation with Antony or with his captains, the woman incontinently sailed away from the encounter.

And now we see Antony at his lowest point when Cleopatra held him more than valour, reputation, victory. For, when he learned that she had gone, he sailed after her immediately. Presently he was taken aboard her flagship, but not till three days later when the vessel reached Taenarus did they meet.

It would be interesting to know the first words spoken by these two stricken people after that defeat at Actium. Perhaps the most tantalizing gaps of history are the gaps







CLEOPATRA BEFORE CÆSAR



that have held words which we would have given much to know.

Following the debacle at Actium, there were many more encounters on a smaller scale. It was now clear that Octavian was gaining ground and that the end could not be long delayed.

In the time that remained to them, Antony and Cleopatra, seized with a sort of furious despair, gave themselves entirely to their old revels. A new Club was formed. No longer did people speak of the "Inimitables"—they spoke of "The Die-Togethers"—the last Club of a dying dynasty. Into that association there were raked all the brightest spirits of the city. "The Suicide Club" might have been a more fitting name, for many of the members ended their lives by their own act.

And now Cleopatra, realizing that if Alexandria fell she would be at the mercy of Octavian, formed an obsession. The fear of being led in triumph through Rome—a captive in golden chains—haunted her persistently. She began to experiment with poisons in order to discover which would bring death quickly and without pain. She found, at length, that the bite of the tiny creature called the asp would do this service.

\* \* \*

At the end of July, Octavian was near Alexandria. Antony realized that the hour had come for him to leave a world that had no further use for him. It is probable he did not fear a cruel death at the hands of Octavian (their old friendship would doubtless have prevented it), but there was enough of the Stoic left in the worn-out spirit to cause him to choose death by his own sword rather than surrender and a prison.

And so, on the night of the 31st of July, he bade his slaves pour out wine and feast him well, "For to-morrow night," he said, "you may be doing this for others and not for me!"

The last battle was now at hand—the battle that was to end the Ptolemaic dynasty and to convert Egypt into a province of Rome. The battle began on the 1st of August. It endured only a short time. Antony's cavalry, being beaten early in the day, deserted and went over to the enemy. The infantry were defeated soon afterwards.

There is no need to linger over the shameful encounter, wherein the last friends of a broken man turned their backs upon him. The battle has been described by a hundred historians: only its outcome concerns us here.

When the thing was ended, Antony returned to the city. There came to him a messenger saying that Cleopatra was dead. The message may have been delivered through some strange misunderstanding—due to the havoc of war—or perhaps Cleopatra for some occult reason wished Antony to believe that she was gone. Already, she had refused repeated bribes from Octavian to connive at the death of her lover.

When Antony was told this news, he smiled and spoke very calmly. He could afford to be calm, realizing that he could defy the stars now, for they could work him no more ill. He went to his bedroom, saying: "I shall go now. Why delay longer since Fate has deprived me of my one reason for wishing to live?"

His slave Eros went with him to the room, and here, in that narrow chamber, Antony unarmed. He took out his sword and ordered Eros to hold the weapon whilst



he ran upon it in the old fashion. But Eros refused, and killed himself instead.

Then Antony smiled and said : " That was well done, O Eros ! You would not do this for me, but at least you teach me how I should do it." Having said this, he made to run upon his sword, but inflicted only a serious wound that did not kill him at the moment. He was alive when people, attracted by his cries, came running to the room. He learned then that Cleopatra was still living.

He revived feebly. He begged them to carry him in a litter to the tomb near the Temple of Isis-Aphrodite that Cleopatra had caused to be built some time before, in an upper room of which building she had taken refuge after the battle. Arrived there, he was hauled up by ropes.

This last meeting of Antony and Cleopatra endured only a few minutes. She knelt beside him, and presently he went, dying, as some poet wrote, " as he had lived," in the arms of the woman whom he had loved—for whose sake he had sacrificed all he had to give.

\* \* \*

Soon after the death of Antony and the fall of the city Octavian, arriving in Alexandria, visited Cleopatra. At this interview she seems to have recovered herself to some extent. It is clear that she made a fight to win Octavian as she had, years before, won Cæsar and at a later time, Marc Antony. But the cold-blooded Octavian was of different stuff from both his kinsmen. He listened coldly to her words, making no comment when she said that all that had happened was inevitable and that she

had played the only part that was possible in the circumstances.

Again and again she pleaded with him, begging that herself and her son might continue to rule Egypt, but Octavian firmly set aside all hopes of this possibility. He went away soon afterwards, having given orders that she was to be rigidly watched lest she should kill herself, and rob him of his triumphant exhibition of her person when the time arrived.

And now, Cleopatra knew that this was indeed the end. Perhaps she might have endured the loss of Antony—she might have brought herself to smile upon Octavian—but when all was said and done, Egypt was her real lover, and losing that lover, she must go.

The means of death soon came. Who exactly contrived it we are not certain, but presently there arrived at the tomb a countryman who brought with him a basket of fruit and eggs for the Queen. In that basket there was hidden an asp. Some writers have suggested that she killed herself with a poisoned pin from her hair, but the asp episode seems the more probable, in view of the fact that when Octavian marched through Rome in triumph, a figure of the dead Queen with the tiny creature clinging to her breast, was carried through the streets of the city.

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Before she died, one thing remained to be done. To the coffin of Antony went the Queen. Having kissed him, she laid flowers on the casket. A little later, she wrote a letter to Octavian, asking that she might be buried with her lover, and this letter having been dispatched by a messenger who was told not to deliver it until



some time had passed, Cleopatra prepared herself for death.

Very calmly, as befitted the daughter of the Macedonian kings, she held the asp to her breast, caressing the little creature as it did its work. And when, hours afterwards, the messenger of Octavian came to the room, he found the Queen dead, with Iras, a slave, dead beside her. Her other slave, Charmian, who was also dying, was using her last moments of life to set the crown of her mistress straight upon the chilling brow.

\* \* \*

So passed Cleopatra at the age of thirty-nine. Into those brief years she had packed a dozen lifetimes of intrigue, battle, triumphs and despairs. With no drop of Roman blood in her, she was at least true to the Roman tradition, and bearing too great a mind to go in chains to Rome, she took the one way that was consistent with her pride. A Stoic philosopher, who lived nearly eighty years afterwards, wrote that of all the gifts of the gods, this gift of passing from life as one desired was the most happy. It was given to Cleopatra to cheat her enemy of his triumph, and we may feel sure that she died happily because of that knowledge.

\* \* \*

After her death, Octavian behaved tolerantly enough, if one judges him by the harsh standards of his time. It is true that he put to death the eldest son (Cæsarion) of Cleopatra and the eldest son of Antony and Fulvia, but he spared the remaining children and showed them kindness. Even in matters of that kind, there was some-

thing of the tolerant Anglo-Saxon conqueror in the future Augustus Cæsar.

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History has been, on the whole, none too kind to this woman. One must remember, however, that the majority of the historians were pro-Roman, and were naturally prejudiced against one who in conjunction with her lover came near to changing the Imperial geography. Some historians have painted her as a courtesan, surrendering herself to every kind of voluptuous degradation—others have held that she might have been a comparatively spotless person but for her obsession to retain Egypt, to which end she resorted to amorous adventures. Perhaps the truth lies in the Aristotelian “mean”—perhaps she was not entirely the facile courtesan nor yet the potential vestal.

That she was sensuous, voluptuous, there is small question ; equally, there is small question that she could have controlled these emotions if by such control she could have gained her ends. But circumstances robbed Cleopatra of choice. Two forces had to be won to her side if Egypt was to retain its integrity. And so she made love to Julius in the beginning, to Antony at the later time. It was not her fault if the long-conceived plan failed at length through the advent of the one man whom her arts could not subdue—the future Augustus Cæsar.

Her character was on the grand scale. She had will power, masculine boldness, ambition intense as that of Julius himself. Her extravagance was perhaps not in the Ptolemaic tradition, but was probably planned to maintain a state that should win for her esteem in the eyes of lavish Rome.

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The personal appearance of this woman is only partially known to us. Of her colouring we know nothing—she may have been fair or dark, quite probably fair. Plutarch says of her beauty that it was not peculiarly striking—nor was it “beyond comparison.”

The Egyptian sculptures are useless as guides, for they invariably portrayed a conventional type of face for their rulers. A bust in the British Museum and certain coins are more useful. In each case we see a strong aquiline nose, a forehead straight and low, a well-modelled chin, large eyes, and a mouth large, but perfectly shaped. The face has a certain coarseness, perhaps, but is rendered charming by the beauty of the eyes and the exquisite grace of the mouth.

The long nose of Cleopatra has been the subject of many witticisms. Pascal in one of his lighter moments said that, had the nose of this woman been shorter, the face of the world might have been changed. But this was mere speculation, hardly worthy of a thinker of Pascal's ability.

A vast literature has, of course, been made round the story of Cleopatra. Moreover, she has provided material for the feeble-minded and foolish. Many ridiculous theories have been put forward. For instance, one scribe (who, through inability, perhaps, to find a publisher, type-wrote several long volumes), tried to prove by mysterious figures and weird calculations that Cleopatra was actually the mother of Christ! Other fantastic and absurd suggestions have been made, their authors involving themselves in enormous efforts to prove their hopeless causes.

\* \* \*

Cleopatra died a failure. Perhaps she attempted too much—perhaps she chose her instruments unwisely.

History has, perhaps, never quite decided whether she was primarily a good woman who became a sinner through the urge of circumstance—or a sinner who struggled towards respectability but died before she could achieve her ambition.







OVID



# Publius Ovidius Naso (Ovid)

(43 B.C.—A.D. 17)

**B**ETWEEN Oscar Wilde—the nineteenth century—Queen Victoria, and Ovid—the first century—Augustus Cæsar—there seems at first glance small likeness. The likeness emerges to some extent when those people and those ages are viewed beneath the magnifying glass of the brain adapted to weighing comparative values. Allowing for divergence in surroundings, point of view and other matters, one is struck immediately by the fact that each of those unfortunate men was bound by an affinity of circumstance. Each began his career with sudden brilliance—each travelled surely to a climax of distinction—each fell with abrupt crash. Finally, each died in exile.

Consider also the likeness between the first autocrat of the Roman Empire and the ruler of Great Britain in the closing year of the nineteenth century. Imagine Augustus changed by some magician into a woman—imagine that woman surrounded by circumstances akin to those of the Court of St. James's—and we have a very fair idea of Her Majesty Queen Victoria. Augustus was proud, domineering, upright, and above all self-righteous. He had what is called a "flair" for respectability. One can picture him going through the visiting-lists of the palace exactly as Victoria would do—striking out the names of the persons who were not exactly the "right sort." Self-conscious always, his last act as he lay dying showed the man. For he called his friends and advisers round his bed and asked them whether he had played well his part on the stage of life. . . . He must have anticipated the answer, for even a dying autocrat may not be offended. The dominant difference, perhaps, between

Augustus and Victoria was this—one was a pagan, the other a Christian. One was a materialist throughout—the other, in spite of a certain hard practicality, possessed a high spiritual sense.

Perhaps, however, the most striking likeness between the opening years of the first century and the closing years of the nineteenth, lies in the fact that Rome at that time seemed to have reached her climax of power and grandeur, whilst simultaneously a certain weariness and decadence were over all things and all men. Precisely the same state of affairs may be said to have existed about the period of the Diamond Jubilee—when Wilde vanished from the ways of men.

This analogy may seem irrelevant and purposeless, but the writer holds the view that it is hard to feel a vital interest in a character that lived two thousand years ago unless one can identify that character to some extent with a vivid experience. The schoolboy yawns over his history lesson, because he is rarely lucky enough to meet a teacher who makes him realize that historical characters ate, drank, slept, quarrelled, loved, and were miserable exactly as he himself has eaten, drunk, slept, quarrelled, and been unhappy. Let us try and visualize Ovid not as a schoolboy's taskmaster—but as a very lovable, very human person who lived life fully, sensuously, greedily, even as Wilde lived it—failing at the end through a weakness. It is, perhaps, one of the tragedies of the world that character like a chain is frequently only equal to the strength of its feeblest link.

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Publius Ovidius Naso was born at Sulmo—ninety miles south-east of Rome—in the year 43 B.C., exactly



twelve years after the deaths of those two warlike amorists, Antony and Cleopatra. He began to write poetry as a boy, neglecting the sports which the average young Roman adored quite as keenly as British youth.

His early efforts as a versifier were discouraged by his father (a man of some wealth and rank). So great was the elder man's dislike of such work that the boy was forced to carry on his writing secretly. Sometimes he would rise in the night and scribble feverish words, painfully listening for a step outside the room, that might tell of his father's approach and the stripes that would fall upon him for the crime of writing poetry. The Roman character was akin in many ways to the Anglo-Saxon. A hearty contempt of the arts and literature was part of the mental stock-in-trade of the comfortable Roman citizen. (Even Virgil, an artist of exquisite fibre, could not help sneering slightly at the arts in his foreshadowing of the destiny of Rome.)

However, when Ovid was twenty years old, his elder brother died, and this death signified that the poet would inherit his father's estate in its entirety. The latter, perceiving that the boy would now be in a position of independence, withdrew his embargo on the "scribbling" as he probably termed it—on the plea that a man of means might amuse himself as he chose.

In the meantime, Ovid had studied for the Bar, but without serious intention. There is no doubt that the young poet was lethargic, lazy and of facile character. He was probably the sort of man of whom people in taverns, discussing with bleary eyes a departed choice spirit, say: "He was nobody's enemy but his own!"

Soon after the death of his brother, Ovid went to Athens to perfect his knowledge of Greek and literature. He

diverted himself, moreover, with visits to certain Greek towns of Asia Minor where the delights were non-academic and associated rather with Aphrodite than with her sister Pallas. Every refinement and perversion of erotic emotion was practised in those cities. The modern rake, accustomed merely to the honest orgies of illicit passion, would be amazed by a revelation of the things done in places where Oriental animalism and Western intellect combined to devise marvels of ingenious voluptuousness.

On the return of Ovid to Rome, he evidently still retained some notion of a public career in a half-hearted way. He became a member of the *Triumviri Capitaless*—a body that was composed of men partly magistrates, partly sheriffs. However, by the time he was twenty-four, he was obviously sick of the official life. It was too “stodgy,” perhaps, for an amorist and an idler of his type. He exchanged the purple stripe of the potential senator for the stripe of the knight—a rank that corresponded to some extent to our modern “esquire” in its original sense.

Previous to this time, however, he had married. His father had chosen for him a wife. An experiment of this kind, though frequently more successful than an impulsive personal choice, could hardly have proved fortunate in the case of a man of Ovid's temperament. Very speedily a divorce followed, but we are left in doubt as to whether it was the conduct of the young wife or her inability to bring her husband a fortune that led to the breach. Ovid certainly seems to have loved her to some extent, but his facile emotion was soon transferred to another young woman, whom he married within a few months of the divorce. This girl was an Etruscan of very considerable



beauty. One would have imagined that this beauty would have held Ovid for several years at least, but he was evidently too much of an adventurer in love to remain constant for any length of time. The second marriage ended as abruptly as the first !

Perhaps, however, the wives may have been responsible, in some measure, for his falling-off. Literary marriages are rarely a success. Why? May it not be because writers do their work at home and their wives therefore imagine that the husbands should always be accessible. There is the possibility that even if he had no new adventure on hand, Ovid, obsessed by his passion for writing, may have caused huge irritation to both women.

His third marriage proved more enduring—indeed it lasted until his death, but the fact that a considerable portion of the last years of the poet's life were spent in exile, and in a place where his wife could not be beside him, may have explained this other inexplicable permanence. In other circumstances, one must imagine that the incontinent writer would have found some excuse for a more or less definite separation. The truth of the matter is that Ovid was never a domestic animal. Just as the tiger at the Zoo, in spite of snug sleeping-places, succulent joints of meat, and friendly remarks of visitors, paces up and down his cage in everlasting fury, so the non-domestic husband, laden with comforts, soon sickens of them and pines for the jungle of unrestrained passions. . . .

But if Ovid was not an ideal husband, he was not, like Horace, his contemporary, a born bachelor. Horace, as we know, never married—never cared for any kind of permanence in his relations with women. Indeed, Horace probably regulated his loves as he regulated his meals.

There was none of the "careless rapture" of Ovid in his amorous composition. Ovid, we feel, would have risked death to secure an hour with Corinna. Horace would probably have left Lalage to wait at his door whilst he finished his last olive at dinner!

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It is one of the misfortunes of the history of remote times that enormous gaps frequently occur in the records of the lives of people concerning whom we would give much to know something more detailed. Thus it happens that little is known about Ovid in the period between the age of twenty-four and fifty, although the record of his literary labour is, of course, complete.

It was a very admirable record. For the poet lived in a society that must have reacted on his genius. The intellectual society, the Rome of Ovid was perhaps the most brilliant that has ever assembled at one time and in one place. The Augustan age was to Rome what the Elizabethan age was to England in regard to an output of artistic and literary endeavour. It is true that Virgil, Horace, Livy, Sallust, and others of that starry sky had developed during the Republic, but their zenith was achieved in the Augustan period. Ovid himself was born as the curtain was about to fall on the last act of the ancient Roman liberties.

His early poems were the "Amores" (a series of erotic verses concerning Corinna, his mistress), the "Ars Amoris" (The Art of Love), and the "Remedia Amoris" (The Remedy of Love). Ovid apparently revelled in the writing of erotic verse—it is probable that he derived more enjoyment from the memory and celebration of



amorous interludes than from the actual interludes in their passage. Every line bears the sincerity of vivid experience. Here is no dreamy Dante singing the praises of an etherealized Beatrice—no Petrarch sounding pæans to a Laura who is more soul than flesh—here is the amorist living over again his glow, recalling each passionate moment—recording it so that no single memory may elude his brain. One must believe that Ovid would have written these love poems for the mere delight of writing them, even if he had not dreamed of publication.

Concerning the "Corinna" of the "Amores" there is the usual vagueness that attaches to the women of whom ancient poets sing. Some believe that she was a woman of very high rank—that she was married—that her husband with the complaisance of the Roman husbands of that time (engaged on their own love affairs), connived at her intrigues with the poet. Others suggest that she was a courtesan, whom Ovid had met in tavern, theatre or circus. At this distance of time it does not matter much which suggestion is correct. It is sufficient that the woman, whether rich or poor—noble or gutter-bred—caused the poet to set down certain lines that give her a reality rarely bestowed in poems of this nature. Her charms are detailed so often and with such realism that she seems to us, after the passage of nearly two thousand years, more real than the woman to whom we sat next at dinner last night! Almost can we feel her breath, perfumed with some Oriental scent, upon our nostrils—almost feel around our necks those wondrous arms of "milky whiteness" that Ovid has described over and over again without growing weary of the description.

The "Ars Amoris" is an elaborate text-book on the mechanism and technicalities of love-making and love-

getting. The student is shown how to stalk his lady in circus or theatre—how to make her acquaintance—how to choose a fitting moment for bestowing a preliminary embrace—how to evade suspicious husbands—how to express devotion by means of secret movements and gestures—and how best to enjoy the raptures of the sexual impulse. Always the pagan idea of love is embodied in the verses—an idea that thought little about a woman's intellect or spirit, but that thought a great deal about her body.

One can imagine Ovid lounging with Corinna (or another and less permanent love), discussing the details of this work, as from day to day he wrote the poems. Possibly Corinna herself may have suggested some of the tricks and subterfuges of the "Ars Amoris"—may, likewise, have suggested certain of the remedies for love embodied in the sister work. For a man of Ovid's temperament was not likely to shut himself up with his imaginings. He would not, like the more solitary Horace, keep his work to himself. He would drink and joke and chat with his girl associates, incidentally getting what modern writers call "copy." Cannot we picture him taking his arm from Corinna's waist to write down some mischievous, some erotic remark?

"The Remedy of Love" is as unmoral as its predecessor. The "Art of Love" having shown how a lover may become infected with amorous passion, the "Remedy" shows he may cure himself. It is rather sordid, here and there. Always the pagan, materialistic view of woman is evident. The love-sick youth is advised to consider the grosser aspects of his mistress—to come upon her in the early morning before she is ready to receive visitors—to contemplate certain physical blemishes.



The form, the colour, the smoothness of the verse compel our admiration ; but the modern mind, Christianized into an entirely different view of woman—a view that regards her as something more than a mere instrument of pleasure—finds little happiness in reading the method of making love or the method of curing it.

Here is a passage taken from one of the earlier poems ("The Amores")—it is a passage entirely characteristic of Ovid. Its frankness may shock certain minds, but the reading of it will throw upon the character and tendencies of Ovid a light that reveals him for what he was—a warm-hearted, irresponsible sensualist. The prose translation is quoted because it is more exact than the metrical version :

" 'Twas sultry and the day had passed its mid-hour  
I lay down to rest on the middle of the couch. One  
shutter of the window was open. . . . It was such a light  
as shrinking maids should have whose modesty impels  
them to shrink away . . . Corinna comes, draped in tunic,  
girdled round, with divided hair flowing over white  
neck. I tore away the tunic, and yet it was fine, and  
hardly marred her charms, but still she struggled for it to  
shelter her. As she stood before me, all drapery now laid  
aside, nowhere did I perceive in her form signs of fault.  
What shoulders—what arms did I see and touch ! How  
built for caresses the form of her bosom ! How smooth  
her form ! What a long and gracious side ! How grace-  
fully fair her thigh ! But why recount each charm when  
I saw nothing that was not worth praise ? . . . Instantly  
I clasped her undraped form to mine, entwined we both  
lay at rest. . . . May my fortune bring many a midday  
like this ! "

Ovid, luckily, did not remain content with personal

reminiscences of loving. In the subsequent poems, "The Metamorphoses" and "The Heroides," he took wings, and skimming joyously through the highest heavens, painted gods, heroes, and the bright assemblage of pagan mythology. Concerning the fifteen books of the "Metamorphoses," one scholar has said that after Homer and *The Arabian Nights*, this work is "The richest storehouse of stories in the world's literature." It begins with the changing of Chaos into Cosmos—it ends with the transformation of Julius Cæsar into a star. Gods and half-gods—heroes and satyrs—animals—birds—all change their shapes in the service of love. Through the gorgeous fabric there runs like a gold thread Ovid's everlasting worship of the sexual impulse.

"The Heroides" (The Heroines) consists of a series of poems in the shape of letters written by women to faithless husbands or lovers. Penelope writes to the absent Ulysses, asking him to send a message—or "Better still, come yourself!" Ariadne pining at Naxos sends a poignant letter to the distant Theseus. In spite of the monotony of the theme, the letters are vivid, intriguing, varied. With remarkable skill, Ovid has contrived to avoid repetitions or at least to mask the repetitions in such manner that they seem new.

Less romantic—more in what is called the classic spirit—are "The Fasti." These poems deal with the Roman almanack. They celebrate feasts, holidays, ceremonies, and here Ovid seems to show something of the Virgilian attitude if not the Virgilian manner. One feels, however, that Ovid was never a patriot in the sense that Virgil was a patriot—that he would have attached himself happily to any land that offered him comfort and society and the love of women.



These, then, are the principal writings of Ovid in the period before the exile. A tragedy, "Medea," said to be a very fine piece of work, was lost. In what was probably an "off-moment," Ovid wrote a little treatise on Cosmetics—it was doubtless inspired by some remark of Corinna. It is singularly apropos to consider the treatise at this time when every woman regards it as her duty to cultivate her complexion as a fine art. "Everything," says Ovid in the essay, "is better for cultivation—the human face is no exception. . . ." He furnishes recipes for brightening the skin—"Dress your face with this preparation," he writes, "and it will shine brighter than your mirror itself." The poet reveals an interest in his subject that is anything but academic—one can imagine him lingering over his beloved recipes for beauty and fitting them to the faces of his loves.

There is no doubt that this period of Ovid's life, a period filled with work, the society of brilliant people, and above all with more or less facile loves, was a time of exquisite enjoyment for the poet. Indeed he writes of himself at a later time that he was always happy—always satisfied—that he would not have been anyone than himself. In his gay, irresponsible attitude towards life—in his light-hearted dance through those avenues of existence which the majority of men find hard—Ovid again recalls to a very large extent the story of Oscar Wilde. The final pages of the poet's story emphasize that likeness with terrible significance.

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Ovid was fifty-one when the blow fell upon him. Going his way joyously, writing, making love, he returned

one afternoon to his house to find awaiting him an order from Augustus to put his affairs in shape and to leave Rome under sentence of banishment.

There was nothing of the Stoic in Ovid. Indeed he may be said to have resembled the Italian of modern times, rather than the Italian of the ancient day. He was overcome, paralyzed. First of all he was incredulous, believed that some blunder had been made. Later, he was overcome with fury, which presently was changed to despair.

The ostensible reason for the banishment was hardly a plausible one. Augustus officially announced that Ovid was to be punished for having written books which by their immoral and pernicious influence might easily corrupt public morals. Whilst one may feel certain that the genuine motive of the Emperor was a more personal one, there may yet have been some honesty in his condemnation of the writings. For Augustus doubtless realized that with the coming of his autocratic government, and with the removal of the nobility from posts of responsibility, the latter in their idleness might easily fall into vicious and luxurious ways. A poet whose work tended to encourage that kind of self-indulgence could not be permitted to carry on his trade.

However, having done the pious Augustus this justice, let us go on to suggest that the real motive for the banishment was the behaviour of Ovid in connection with Julia, the Emperor's enterprising daughter. Julia was probably one of the most immoral young women in Rome—her vagaries would fill many pages of a "Chronique Scandaleuse" and fill them with intriguing matter. It is believed that Ovid, good-natured, rash, perhaps a little stupid, afforded Julia a certain amount of help in



one of her more scandalous adventures. He may have acted as a "go-between"—or he may have merely aided the girl to conceal her behaviour from her father.

Without wishing to be unkind to the memory of Ovid, one cannot help fancying that he took an active part in the business, for surely he was the sort of man who would have loved being concerned in a love affair, as a principal if possible, but failing that honour, as a small-part actor. Perhaps his own engagement book at that time held no attractive date. In the lives of all men of pleasure there come certain Saharas. It may be a period of satiety—it may be a period when the luck that presides over amours is not asserting itself. At such times, the amorist is frequently unselfish enough to devote a few hours or days to furthering the schemes of other amorists. Ovid paid a high price for his altruism in the service of his favourite Eros.

That Ovid attributed his downfall to some incident of this kind rather than to the immorality of his writings is clearly proved by certain of his laments. In the "Tristia" (The Sorrows) written during the exile, he says:

"Why did I see something? Why did I make my eyes guilty? Why did I unknowingly become acquainted with guilt? Two faults overthrew me—my poems and my wrong-doing, but about the guilt of one of these I must be silent. . . . You (Augustus) avenged on me a quarrel of your own. To have had the power of sight—that alone has been my sin. . . ."

It is true that he refers here to the poems having been instrumental to some extent in his undoing, but the secret episode is clearly the main cause as it seemed to Ovid. And Augustus was precisely the sort of man to adopt the Pecksniffian method of avenging a private grievance.

But Augustus, if inclined to be something of a "poseur" and a hypocrite (his early years held many immoral acts), was undoubtedly an urbane sort of person. He hinted that Ovid might arrange his departure at his own convenience—that there was no necessity for urgent speed. The miserable poet seems to have taken advantage of this indulgence to such an extent that the days and weeks passed without any definite preparation on his part for the farewell to Rome. Here is his own account of his state of mind :

" When I recall the picture of my last night in Rome, my tears fall. Why, I had not even thought of getting ready ! The very time allotted me was against me, for so long was the preparation that my heart had grown idle at the thought of it. I had not even chosen my clothes or my slaves, or the money that the banished need. I was dazed like him who, struck by a thunderbolt, still lives but is unconscious. When at last I clasped my wife, her tears were more salt than my own. It was even as my funeral might have been. . . ."

His very exit was filled with misery. A storm came near to wrecking the vessel in the Adriatic, as he was borne upon the journey to the place of exile, Tomi, on the coast of the Black Sea, 200 miles north of Byzantium. Augustus could hardly have chosen a more inhospitable place for the banishment. For months Tomi lay under heavy snows—the winds carried away the roofs of houses—Ovid tells us that the wine froze as it was poured out, but this is, perhaps, poetic exaggeration. There is no doubt, however, that Tomi was hardly the place one would choose for an exile, no matter how brief.

The details of the life of Ovid during the ten hard years of Tomi are recorded in his writings. During that



exile he wrote the "Tristia," a series of laments, and "Epistola ex Pontis" (The Letters from the Pontus). In the first of these works he continually rails against destiny—he describes the wretched climate of his Tomi—he speaks of the semi-barbarous people who are his companions. In the preface to the first book of the "Tristia," he offers the volume to those who still love him. He adds a pathetic request that the book shall not be ornamented after the fashion of Roman volumes. He wished it to be as bare as his own life had now become.

The second book of the "Tristia" is a sort of apologia for his life addressed to Augustus himself. He points out that he did little harm as an erotic writer, because the poems were written for those whom they could not injure. The modest reader, Ovid plaintively explains, was warned against reading the love poems. The tone of the "Tristia" is marred by self-condonation and a sort of fulsome grovelling to the Emperor. But when Ovid speaks of his nobler work—his "Metamorphoses," his "Heroides," then the peevishness is forgotten and there shines a sudden gleam of nobility.

"The Letters from the Pontus" are addressed to friends of the poet. Tiny domestic details of his life are given—trivial annoyances are mingled with deep sorrows. Everlastingly there is the appeal for sympathy and for help—he begs, he implores his friends to use their influence to get a mitigation of his sentence. "The life is killing me," he writes. "Surely Augustus cannot hold out against me further," he protests. And so on, and so on, he pursues his theme with a persistence which probably annoyed his friends and certainly produced no result.

Undoubtedly his existence was rather horrible. Imagine

a man suddenly wrenched from the soft surroundings of Rome—from the society of the most brilliant people, from the consolation of many beautiful women—and set down in a frozen place, with semi-savages for his companions and friends. An Aurelius—an Epictetus—might have borne this transplanting with calmness, if not with satisfaction, but Ovid, as we have said, had no touch of the Stoic. Philosophy had never been his favourite study. Soft, pliant, emotional, he found no solace in his brain, and although his mind was of that quality that it might easily have become his kingdom, his temperament was such that the sovereignty could never be proclaimed. He found a species of comfort in writing, but it was only a half-hearted solace. He was a doomed man—he had nothing to which to look forward except death, and death he probably feared with the panicky fear of the complete sensualist.

\* \* \*

On the 14th of August, A.D. 14, Augustus died. The passage of time had softened his attitude towards the exile, and it is believed that at the time of his death the Emperor was possibly contemplating a pardon. Once more the chances that guide affairs played a harsh trick upon the poet, for had Augustus survived only a few more months, Ovid would no doubt have returned to Rome and gradually have regained some kind of position.

“Dis aliter visum.” Nor was there any hope of pardon from Livia, the widow of Augustus, or from the coarse brute Tiberius, who succeeded him. Ovid formed no false hopes concerning these people. He did not address to either of them a single petition. However, he still continued to write to friends, begging them to inter-



cede for him, probably believing that whilst he himself could not soften authority, his powerful allies in Rome might have better fortune.

No pardon came. So once more he turned himself to the solace of work. He wrote revisions of certain parts of the "Metamorphoses" and added sections to the "Fasti."

Ovid had no sense of humour to console him. One can imagine a Dickens or a Horace in exile, each finding in surroundings or in people certain things for amusement. Ovid, obsessed by self-pity, the most corroding of all emotions, saw life as a damp burial-ground in so far as his own affairs were concerned. Where could he look for comfort? The political exile has at least a sense of a proud martyrdom—the poet, soft, self-indulgent, full of shame, had no refuge save in measureless self-pity. Dante exiled—Victor Hugo exiled—did their finest work. They believed that they had done the best that was in them when they brought about their banishments. But Ovid felt, perhaps, like a schoolboy, ignominiously expelled for some obscene trick.

He had his happier moments, of course. When he contemplated his writings, he was satisfied. There is a fine passage in the "Metamorphoses" wherein he predicts for the poems and for himself a certain immortality. But apart from those isolated moments, he was perhaps the unhappiest man that ever lived during those years in the dismal swamp of Tomi.

\* \* \*

Ovid wrote his last lines on the 1st June, A.D. 17. He wrote them for the "Fasti," praising Tiberius for his

zeal and piety in erecting and decorating certain new temples. It is a mere chance, of course, that the last words of this poet were words of kindness, but the fact is symbolical of Ovid's character. There was no bitterness in him, always would he have offered a kindness rather than an offence. In the September of that year (or perhaps shortly before September), he died, his passage being watched by the faithful slaves who had come with him into exile. His wife, who had remained in Rome, was not with him, but it says something for the character of this immortal sinner that she always loved him, believed in him, and would have gone with him into exile had this privilege been given her.

\* \* \*

It has been said that Ovid was the last genuine poet of what may be regarded as the great period of Roman literature. In his appreciation and celebration of form and colour and the outward aspects of life and land and sea, he perhaps surpassed any Roman or even Greek poet. But he had no mysticism—no spirituality and certainly no reverence. His character reacted on every line of his work. His nature, obsessed by the desire of the eyes, gave him a genius for the form and colour of outward things, but shut out the things of the spirit.

As a story-teller he was unequalled, but his vitality made him too exuberant, too verbose. His verse, whether elegiac or hexameter, was invariably smooth, gay, with the dance of the joy of life running through the fabric. No translation has succeeded in giving Ovid more than a fraction of his beauty. But is it not the saddest of all facts in connection with literature that (with a few exceptions)



only the poorest writers translate with any kind of success? One can take a trashy French feuilleton and turn it into quite passable English, but where is the translator who shall give us the equivalent of Racine, of Flaubert, or of poor Verlaine? If the modernists of education have their way and end the study of Latin and Greek in schools, they will have done for many men the most cruel of injuries. For there is not one Greek or Latin writer of any genius whose work can be done into English, French, or German, or indeed any language, with even approximately good results.

Ovid can only be approximately translated, but even the crudest translation cannot take away the glow and the stupendous imagination. He has left his influence everywhere in literature—first on the writings of the Italian Renaissance, and later on in our own country in Shakespeare, Marlowe, Dryden and even the austere Milton. Painters during and after the Renaissance period were hugely influenced by the poet. And although the school-boy may writhe as he studies Ovid, at a later period he owes much of his elegance in Latin composition to this many-hued sinner!

\* \* \*

This study began with an analogy between the lives of Oscar Wilde and Ovid—let us end on the same note. For the circumstances of their last years aid the analogy.

Wilde in the exile of Reading Gaol wrote his “*De Profundis*” and “*The Ballad*”—Ovid wrote the “*Tristia*” and the “*Letters*.” The identical note of despair emerges in the compositions of both poets. Each was consumed with self-pity—each was remorseful.

Wilde took his last look at life from a bed in a squalid

hotel in a back street of Paris. Ovid died with the mists and fogs of his hated swamp rising round the house. Wilde, a few days before his death, was received into the Roman Catholic Church, and was thus assured of a personal immortality. For Ovid, the pagan, there was no such definite hope, for the pagan mind, although willing to accept a vague belief in an after-world, rarely derived much sound comfort from the possibility.

We may hope and believe, however, that for Ovid there was another solace. In that last hour, when the tireless brain ceased working, he may have comforted himself with dreams of an immortality which, if not the immortality of the Christian, was at least of the sort that a poet might cherish. Or, perhaps, the work forgotten, he lay with closed eyes, happy, satisfied, because he had lived and loved—could say with a poet of a later Italian day :

“ Vi sono momenti nella che bastarebbero a  
pagare, a compensare i tormenti d'un eternita.”



# Abelard and Heloise

(1079-1142—1101-1164)

“**A**MONG the many thousands of tombs in the cemetery of Père La Chaise in Paris, there is one that no man, no woman passes without stopping to examine it. That is the grave of Abelard and Heloise—a grave that has been more widely known—more sung about—more revered, the world over, than any other tomb in Christendom. . . .”

In these words Mark Twain, with the sentimentality of the humorist in an “off” moment, spoke of the tomb that holds the dust of two persons whose romance was frustrated almost at its beginning. It is the misfortune of Heloise that so sweet and altruistic a woman has been associated in history with a man who, in our modern language, would be called a cad and a prig. That his caddishness and his priggishness existed in conjunction with wisdom and brave thinking is not necessarily a fact in his favour. One may forgive a fool where one cannot forgive a philosopher.

Peter Abelard was born in Brittany in 1079. His father desired to make him a soldier like himself, but the boy preferred logic and the schools. He learned everything with great ease. Like John Stuart Mill, he came to know Greek almost as spontaneously as he knew his own baby language. In early manhood, Peter Abelard travelled through the country after the manner of the scholars of that time, engaging in scholastic controversies. His reputation as a dialectician was made with ease. Indeed, before he had arrived at the age of twenty-one he had established in Paris a school of logic, where his lectures brought crowds of people, who were fascinated by

his voice, his eloquence and his appearance. With naive frankness, Abelard tells us of himself that he was tall, very well-favoured and very attractive to women.

With the nineteen years that followed this establishment of the school—the years that ensued before his meeting with Heloise—we are not concerned. He was forty when he saw her for the first time—an age when the blood is usually sufficiently cool to allow emotions of pity to hold a place in a man's brain. But although he must have foreseen the miserable consequences, this logician and philosopher deliberately set out to seduce this girl of nineteen. He was aware that her uncle Fulbert, a canon of the cathedral, with whom she lived, was very anxious to let certain rooms in his house to persons who would pay him well for the privilege of living there. An arrangement was soon made, whereby Abelard was to receive board and lodging and at the same time to instruct Heloise in logic and other things. How thoroughly the innocent Fulbert was fooled, is proved by the fact that in the innocence of his clerical heart he actually authorized Abelard to inflict stripes upon his pupil if she showed signs of laziness or inattention.

Abelard in his *Historia Calamitatum*, callously sets down this incident. He goes on to record that he followed the instruction, but that the blows were tender blows of love and cajolery. He lost not a moment in making violent love to his pupil. It was a speedy affair, this wooing—before many days had passed, the lovers had sounded the deeps of their new experience. One imagines that the lessons in logic and philosophy were perfunctory enough. Abelard yielded himself to erotic emotions and neglected his work—his lectures. Gradually he came



to a stagnation that left him idle except for the writing of foolish erotic verses.

The lovers took no pains to conceal the intrigue. Very soon Fulbert discovered what was happening, and after a violent scene, Abelard was thrust from the house. However, he was not the sort of man to yield submissively. A few nights afterwards he returned. Breaking into the place like a thief, he took Heloise away with him to Brittany, disguised in the clothing of a nun. In Brittany their love affair was renewed, but already his abrupt passion was fading. It is possible, too, that in the grey light that frequently illumines the waking from a madness of the sort, he saw that he had made a very complete fool of himself.

His position was a very serious one. He had something of a reputation to guard—moreover, he went in physical dread of the fury of Fulbert and certain other relatives of Heloise. In order to appease their anger, he announced that he was willing to go through a form of marriage with his mistress. He desired, however, that the marriage should be a secret affair, so that his clerical position might not be damaged. The birth of a child in Brittany rendered this secrecy impossible.

Heloise returned to her home after giving birth to the child. It is conceivable that all might now have been well for her—she might indeed have lived to forget this early misery—to have found diversion if not happiness—had not the egotism of Abelard intervened. Once more he took her from home and insisted on the girl entering as a nun the Abbey of Argentuil, near Paris.

Why he did this, one cannot determine with any kind of accuracy. He may have honestly feared for her happiness in a home where reproaches would be heaped upon

her at all times—he may have believed that in the religious house she would find a measure of peace if not of happiness. Or, perhaps, and this is quite a feasible theory—he belonged to that order of humanity that is like the “dog-in-the-manger” of the nursery legend. Since he himself could not, or would not, possess her society, he did not wish any other man to have that opportunity.

Whatever the motive, the act infuriated the relatives of Heloise. Her uncle, Fulbert (himself not a very praiseworthy person), hired ruffians, who went at night to the lodgings of the logician and inflicted upon him a horrible mutilation.

When Abelard recovered from his wounds, he turned towards the consolations of the monastic life. The priesthood was now denied to him, because his physical condition was such that the Church would not admit him to perform a holy office. He went to the Monastery of St. Denis. Before taking the vows he insisted on Heloise binding herself to the religious life in like manner.

Now, one would have imagined that the experience through which this man had passed would have humbled his spirit—depressed his egotism. It left him unchanged. At St. Denis he annoyed and irritated his companions by his assumption of superiority—his contempt of their speech, their mannerisms, their theology.

Monks, like other people, are doubtless human enough to make a monastery a very disagreeable place for those persons whom they wish to force into departure. When at length the monks had achieved this purpose, Abelard left the monastery, and going to the banks of the River Arduon, built there with his own hands a rude little church. (A modern novelist has used this episode in a





HELOISE TAKING THE VEIL





remarkable story dealing with a clergyman exiled from his church.)

This sensational act on the part of Abelard caused enormous interest. Moreover, it gained him a large number of devotees, who came in troops to the banks of the river and lived hermit lives with Abelard as their leader.

At a later time, these "Parishioners" paid for the building of a more conventional kind of church. Abelard called this church the "Paraclete" (Comforter). For he said that God had sent him this consolation in the wilderness of his sorrow.

The coming back of friends meant the increase of egotism. The character of Peter Abelard was of the sort that cannot retain friendship. One by one, his new allies fell off from him, driven away by his childishness of spirit—his small vanities. Moreover, he now had a powerful rival in the ascetic Saint Bernard. At length, he abandoned his church by the river and once more entered a monastery.

Here, at the holy house of St. Gildas in Brittany, he found himself among half-savage monks whose piety was probably on a far lower scale than their very human resentment of superiority and egotism. He was foolish enough to ridicule and criticize with contempt their methods and their habits. Enraged by his behaviour, they endeavoured to murder him. With horrible sacrilege, they actually placed poison in the Communion cup. This trick having failed, they bribed servants to infect his food. Another person ate the poisoned dish and died. At length they hired ruffians to attack him on the highway. Again he escaped.

It is very hard to reconcile this foolish behaviour of Abelard with his well-deserved reputation as thinker and

logician. One would have imagined that even the stupidest of men would have learned a lesson—would have made an attempt to alter his behaviour and his manners. But his many ordeals seem to have left him untouched in regard to his method of conducting himself in relation to his surroundings.

In that voluminous letter, the *Historia Calamitatum* (to which we have already referred), he details his many sufferings with a self-pity that only a weak character could have exhibited. In that letter, moreover, he reveals the most intimate matters of his relationship with Heloise—a disgraceful revelation when one remembers that Abelard had little doubt that the letter would, sooner or later, be given to the world.

That letter came to the hands of Heloise, though it was not written to her, but to a friend of the self-pitying monk. How the blunder arose one cannot decide, but one wonders whether Abelard may not have arranged the episode with a deliberation entirely characteristic of his base tendencies. Is it not possible that he contrived this manœuvre so that Heloise, reading the letter, might be entirely disillusioned concerning him—might cease to weary and sadden him with reminiscences and with regrets?

If this theory was indeed the fact—if indeed Abelard, with a very poor understanding of feminine character, wished to end her passion for himself, his object failed. For the sight of the letter with its record of past fervour served only to rekindle the old fires. It brought him in reply a letter of many pages—perhaps the longest letter in the history of lovers' correspondence. (The letter would cover about twenty-six pages of this volume.) Here are some extracts :



“Heloise to Abelard—To her Lord, Her Father, Her Brother, His Servant, His Child, His Wife, His Sister—to express all that is humble, respectful and loving to her Abelard——”

“A letter of yours to a friend chanced some days since to come into my possession : my knowledge of the character and my love of it made me curious to open it. Nor was I scrupulous about breaking the laws of good breeding when I was to hear tidings of my dear Abelard. But how dear did this curiosity of mine cost me and how astonished was I when I found that the letter was filled with an account of our misfortunes. . . . This seeing of the wounds that you described reopened them—caused them to bleed anew. . . .”

After referring to the sorrows which he has experienced (she says little about her own), Heloise continues :

“Let me confess that I was much easier in my mind before I had read your letter. Do not all the misfortunes of lovers come to them through their eyes ? On reading the letter, I felt all mine renewed. Let me publish your calamities to a world that has never appreciated you. . . .”

She then begs him to be frank with her—to write faithful accounts of all that happens to him. She points out that the mingling of their sighs may make his sufferings less severe.

She prizes letters . . . “Even as we only treasure people most fondly when they are away from us, so do we treasure their letters. I have your portrait in my room here. If a picture which is but a silent representation of you can afford such delight, what cannot your letters

inspire? They have souls : surely they can speak. . . . I will content myself with a few lines from you. O, is it so very hard for one who loves, to write? "

After a number of mild reproaches (mild because Heloise was a gentle soul, incapable of the virago outburst), she goes on to say :

" Even here (in the nunnery) I love you as much as in the former times. Remember this—that had I been one who simply loved pleasure I could easily have gratified myself. I was only twenty-two—and there were plenty of men left in the world when I was deprived of yourself. Yet did I not bury myself in a nunnery and triumph over love at an age when surely I was capable of enjoying it to the deepest extent? "

The letter ends on a note of humility—she begs him to teach her the maxims and the ways of Divine love, but she adds that they must remember, also, their human affections.

This letter has formed the subject of an elegiac poem by Pope. He shows us Heloise alternating between spiritual and profane love. In this poem, Pope achieves a certain ecstasy not frequently associated with his precise and formal composition. How this smooth sayer of smooth platitudes found himself in sympathy with the story of Heloise it is difficult to determine, and indeed the poem forms one of those puzzles that from time to time rise to intrigue the student of literary mysteries.

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Unlike Abelard in his monasteries and his river-side church, Heloise in her nunnery had a smooth, if not a



happy life. Her altruistic character brought her much love. Her fellow-nuns adored her, loving her none the less and perhaps a little more for her part in the love-story.

Eventually, she became Abbess of Argentuil, and ruled the holy house with firmness, but great kindness. She was no mere meek, loving fool, this woman. She had brilliant talents—her mind had been carefully trained. This fact makes the action of Abelard in forcing her into seclusion all the more brutal. Had she been a girl of the people—an irresponsible fool at any man's mercy—he might honestly have fancied that the religious life was her best safeguard. One fancies that this egotist was himself miserable—consciously or subconsciously, he wished her to share his unhappiness. That she was wretched in the early months we may be certain—she revolted against the life of the nunnery, with its irritating restrictions, its primitive diversions. It was only at a later stage that resignation and happiness came to her. But even at that stage she longed for his love—frequently wrote to him of her loneliness.

Everlastingly Abelard replies with pedantry—with sawdust consolations. Indeed, the man was only emotional when self-pitying. "I have suffered for you, but far, far more through you," he wrote. In another letter, he ordered Heloise to be silent—not to agitate his soul with lamentations. It is characteristic of the hide-bound egotist that he invariably pities himself for being forced to listen to sorrows, but finds little pity for the actual sufferer.

However, this insufferable egomaniac was kind enough to give Heloise one consolation. In a sentimental moment, he wrote that when she died, her body might be placed

beside his own, if he died before herself. One imagines that Heloise, the sincere lover rather than the false sentimentalist, derived small comfort from this bombastic assurance.

The later years of the life of Peter Abelard were years of storm, anxiety, hatred, struggle, disgrace. His writings on theological matters—writings wherein he anticipated in many directions the work of Martin Luther—incensed the Church to the point of fury. There came the time when he was accused of heresy—when his books were publicly burned by order of the Archbishop of Paris. For Abelard there was never more than a breathing-time of peace. Storm seems to have been a constant part of his life—one wonders how often he must have lain awake, asking himself whether the fever was worth while. If he did not kill himself, it was, perhaps, not so much religious habit that forbade the act as the unconquerable belief of the egotist that finally he must triumph.

During the last years he found refuge in the Abbey of Cluny. When at length his health broke down, he was sent to a priory in the neighbourhood of Chalons, where he died on the 21st April, 1142. His character was feeble enough in many respects, but it says something for him that at least he was not a deserter. There must have been many moments when he was tempted by the rancour of his associates and by other vexations to abandon the religious life—to break his vows. He did neither of these things, and died, as he had lived, in a religious house.

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Abelard was buried in the chapel of the "Paraclete,"







A SERMON BY ABELARD



and here Heloise came to live as Abbess during the last years of her life. She died twenty-one years after the passage of Abelard. A legend says that when the grave was opened to receive her, the arms of the dead man stretched out to enfold the corpse !

Many years afterwards, the remains of Abelard and Heloise were removed to another place of burial. Again this was done, their bones at last coming to rest in the cemetery of Père la Chaise.

\* \* \*

Abelard was a man of genius. Let us concede him that : we have never suggested that his intellect was at fault. He was a very remarkable orator—thousands of people came to hear him speak. His claims to the memory of later centuries rest, perhaps, on two foundations—the fact that he was loved too much by an exceptional woman—the fact that he heralded the era of liberal thought in connection with religion.

It has been said that in the beginning Abelard loved glory and applause, because they flattered his vanity, but let us do him the justice to affirm that he was sincere throughout and that later, indeed, he became something of a fanatic. Yet this very fanaticism itself is held by cynics to be a form of vanity. May not the martyr in the flames—asks the cynic—feel a thrill of self-advertisement ? Well, perhaps. . . . After all, man does not understand himself—how then shall a writer writing eight hundred years later, interpret exactly, or even approximately, all the motives, the subtleties, the truths, the half-truths, and the quarter-truths, that went to make up the consciousness of Peter Abelard. The unhappy

writer of biography can only write certain facts and guess the remainder !

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Many stories—many poems—have been written round the lives of these two people ; the popular imagination has seized upon the history of Abelard and Heloise as one of the famous love stories of the world, to use a somewhat overworked and irritating expression. The “ popular ” mind is naturally attracted by the dramatic episodes of the affair—by the swift and tempestuous wooing, the vicissitudes of Abelard in his monastic retreats, the building of his church, the long rigid life of Heloise in the nunnery, and, of course, by the eventual joining in the grave.

Even so cynical a romance-writer as Mr. George Moore has been wooed by the story, and a few years ago Mr. Moore wrote a “ picaresque ” novel, wherein the adventures of Abelard and Heloise up to a certain point are very exquisitely conceived. Mr. Moore has always held that the well-known “ Letters ” were forgeries, and in 1925 Mr. Scott Moncrieff published a translation from the Latin of eight letters pointing out that Mr. Moore’s view was entirely justified. If indeed this is the case, and if the “ Letters ” which have always been accepted as authentic are indeed forgeries, then one can only imagine that the original translator took liberties with the text and perhaps hid the manuscript. The finding of the manuscript would, of course, furnish the modern translator with the true correspondence.

However, whether the letters that have always been accepted are indeed accurate versions or are inaccurate,

the fact remains that they express the inherent spirit of Abelard and Heloise ; a spirit that has held their story intact to this hour—that has given them a place among the outstanding persons whose love affairs have entered into history.

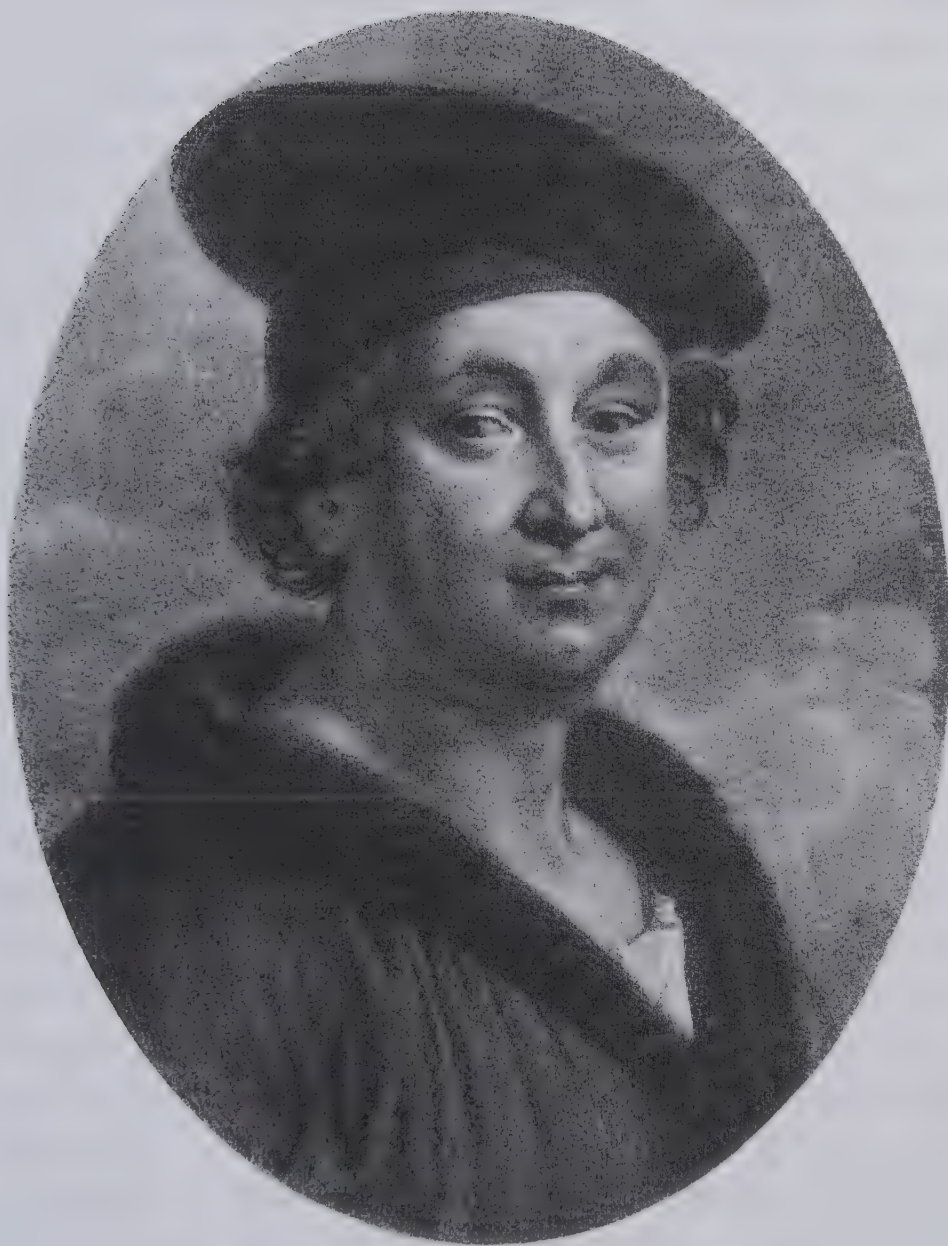


## François Villon

(1431—?)

**F**OURTEEN hundred and fourteen years after the death of Ovid, in a world that had long outlived its pagan colours, a world "grown grey" from the breath of a "Conquering Galilean," there was born a poet who whilst akin to Ovid in his passion for the sensuous side of life, was diametrically opposed to the Latin poet in point of view and criticism of existence. For Ovid was an optimist—Villon a pessimist. Ovid saw the brilliant flesh of woman as an enduring covering—Villon saw the skeleton and the vanity beneath. Ovid, the child of a triumphant Empire at its climax, saw life as a hothouse of enjoyments—Villon, the bedraggled infant of a country that hardly knew itself, saw life as a charnel-house and a prison from which he sought to escape by the avenues of wine and woman. Yet, had these two met in the Elysian Fields or some other after-region, we might imagine them comparing notes—might see Ovid dreamily recalling an afternoon with Corinna—Villon insolently retorting with a story of a passage with Katherine. We may feel sure that the dominant thing in the memories of both would be the feminine theme.

François Villon was called by that name after his adoption by Guillaume de Villon, a chaplain of the church of Saint Benoit de Betourne. His real name is not definitely recorded. Sometimes, before his adoption, he was known as François de Montcorbier—sometimes as Michel Mouton. He was born in the summer of 1431, at a moment that concerns English history, for a few months before his birth Joan had been burned at Rouen, and the same year saw the crowning of an English king in France.



VILLON





It was a time in that country of lost self-respect—of chaos. It has been suggested that every man of artistic genius seems born at the exact moment that shall blend with his tendencies. It was thus with Villon. His crimes, his weaknesses, his errors—all symbolized France in that hour of degradation and loss.

His family was poor, undistinguished. We know little of them. He had one rich relative, an uncle in an Angers monastery—to this uncle he frequently went when funds were low or when the officers of the law were causing him disturbance.

At seventeen, he became a student at the University of France. Those moderns who know the University of to-day as a place of exquisite culture—the former home of a famous mathematician like Condorcet—of a philosopher like Henri Bergson of our own era—can form small conception of its character in the time of François Villon. The same roof covered classrooms and “Bordelles.” When riots took place—when students broke the law, sometimes committing serious crimes, the Church, that formed so large an authority of the University, frequently protected the youths from the civil power. Dicing, drinking, thieving, and other diversions of a more lurid character were practised in the precincts of the building, and if not encouraged by the authorities, were undoubtedly tolerated.

In spite of these diversions wherein he shared fully, Villon contrived to win a Bachelor of Arts degree at the age of nineteen, and a Master of Arts degree two years later. But his culture was always superficial. Nor does he pride himself upon that culture. Villon was no self-deceiver. His realism extended to himself.

His extreme poverty may have made him unscrupulous.

An allowance of two sous per week for board does not leave much room for legitimate expenditure. He supplemented the allowance by thievish tricks, and even in those early years, probably sponged on some girl. Years afterwards, in a "macabre" poem called "*La Ballade de Grosse Margot*," he celebrated the joys and miseries of the life of the "souteneur"—boldly proclaiming himself one of that order.

In those University days, he learned all the secrets of thieves—their haunts, their slang, their methods of picking pockets and picking locks, of passing false coin, and the making of it, of robbing travellers, hoodwinking tavern-keepers and a dozen other sordid tricks.

Later, when living at the cloister of Saint Benoit, he became acquainted with Regnier de Montigny, Colin de Cayeux and Guy Tabarie. All of them were irresponsible profligates and thieves. Another of his friends, the notorious Perette Mauger (who was known as a receiver of stolen goods to all the underworld of Paris), was buried alive at a later stage as a punishment for his crimes. This horrible penalty was reserved for special offenders.

It will be obvious, therefore, that Villon made an exceptionally bad beginning. His subsequent career was quite in keeping with the opening episodes. It is possible that the keynote of his character was laziness. His works prove this to some extent. Never do we find anything in the shape of laborious extended verse. It is always more or less reminiscent stuff—and what is easier than reminiscizing? Is it not the last refuge of the literary incompetent? Even if Villon had had the epic tendency, one cannot imagine him sitting down to write an epic. There would have been too much constructive labour



involved. The ballad with its simple stanza form suited his temperament far better.

His love affairs were transient—feverish. Sometimes they lasted only a day or a week. He went from girl to girl, not caring much who or what she was as long as her face and figure pleased him. He was the tavern lover “in excelsis.” One cannot imagine him making love in a drawing-room! Sometimes he would amuse himself by simultaneous flirtations. He would make love to a Marie or a Jeanne in one tavern, and then leaving her for an hour, go and divert himself with a Margot or a Pauline at another drinking-place, returning to the first “amorette” when he had finished with the second.

Only two outstanding love affairs are recorded—one with Katherine de Vausselles, the other with a certain “Rose” whose surname does not appear to have reached us. The affair with Katherine was, perhaps, the most serious of his hectic life. It continued for some months, but ended abruptly. For one night, whilst Villon was enjoying certain moments with Katherine (who evidently had tired of him), he was set upon by another lover, Noël Joly, a burly fellow who seems to have given the poet a tremendous beating. Poor Villon, no hero—no fighter—abandoned Katherine incontinently after this encounter and went off to Angers to seek consolation and house-room with his relative. Too frightened or too politic to seek any direct vengeance upon the girl, he contented himself, at a later time, by vilifying her in his work, “*Le Grand Testament*,” concerning which we shall have something to say when the time comes.

The appetite of this man for life was the appetite of the dyspeptic in regard to food. At times it seemed too great to be satisfied—at other times it languished, and then



Villon could see nothing of beauty in woman, but only the potential corpse.

He went his way, writing, thieving, occasionally enjoying a scuffle in tavern or street, but committed no serious offence until a certain date in 1455. On the 5th June of that year, the poet whilst seated outside the church of Saint Benoit with a girl called Isabeau and a young priest called Gilles, was suddenly attacked by another priest, a Philippe Sermoise. Jealousy was perhaps the motive. Villon, driven into a corner, retaliated fiercely. He stabbed his assailant and then bludgeoned his head furiously. Only desperate fear could have made Villon show fight.

The age was a lax one—but even in that age, murder was regarded as a somewhat serious matter. For murder it was held to be, this act of Villon, his victim dying a few days after the attack. The poet was in a state of panic. He feared death with the fear of the sensualist, who loves his body more than anything on earth.

Fortunately for successive generations who have read and loved his subsequent poems, Villon was not condemned to death with his masterpiece unwritten. His friends at the University intervened—and it is probable that his excellent patron, Guillaume Villon, also bestirred himself to save his adopted son. Petitions to the King were drawn up, whilst Villon, in his cell, feverishly flew at every gaoler who entered, jerking out passionate enquiries concerning a reprieve. At length, justice was satisfied by sending him into exile, which merely meant banishment to a convenient distance from his well-loved Paris. It is an interesting feature of ancient judicial procedure that whereas trivial offenders were frequently barbarously punished, major criminals often escaped with

trivial penalties. Villon, after a year's exile, received a free pardon from the King !

This episode of the killing of Philippe Sermoise was merely the prelude to a more terrible experience. For Villon, evidently believing that he possessed what is called a charmed life and that he would invariably scrape through trouble, returned to Paris to renew his vagabond life of thieving, tavern-loafing, and love-making.

He belonged to several associations or "gangs." These gangs were formed of ruffians compared with whom the Paris "Apachés" of to-day are innocent sucklings. With sardonic humour, each gang would call itself by the name of some respectable trade. Of these felons' companies, "Les Coquillards" was, perhaps, the most notorious, and Villon was an important member of that band.

It has been said that the most terrible experience of the poet's life was yet to come. That experience was the outcome of a very serious robbery at the College de Navarre, in Paris.

On the morning of March 9th, 1457, the authorities at that place were horrified to find that during the night their sacristy had been entered by thieves, 500 golden crowns had been robbed. The police experts (as fatuous then as many of them are to-day) could form no view more helpful to the discovery of the thieves than the suggestion that the robbery was the work of amateurs.

Some time later, a certain Messire Pierre Marchant, a country priest, came to Paris. Whilst drinking in a tavern, he made the acquaintance of Guy Tabarie. Guy, having formed an immediate liking for the easy-going priest, proceeded to become very drunk in his company. It was said of this Tabarie that a single bottle of wine



made him the most boastful man in Paris. After two bottles he was probably in a condition when he would have risked the hangman's rope in order to sing his own song of praise. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that he began to boast of his genius for picking locks, and ended by giving the priest a detailed account of the part he had played in the robbery at the College.

The latter seemed amused, delighted. He applauded the story, and heaped further drinks on Guy. At a later time he was introduced to other members of the "Brotherhood" to which Tabarie and Villon belonged, and was asked to join the precious gang. In the fifteenth century priests were by no means shocked by such invitations. Moreover, it is interesting to observe that the introduction to the gang took place in the church of Notre Dame, a frequent rendezvous for thieves, beggars and cut-throats, exactly as St. Paul's Cathedral in London was a rendezvous in early centuries.

At this meeting, Tabarie explained that Villon, the most enthusiastic member, was then at Angers, where he was trying to gain information to enable a very important robbery to be carried out. The priest, pretending to be attracted by the prospect of becoming a working member of the gang, played his part admirably. Having extracted from the thieves as many secrets as he could contrive, he incontinently went to the authorities and denounced the brotherhood. It is possible that he hoped to win a reward for his treachery.

Tabarie was immediately arrested. He showed, at first, great fortitude, refusing to speak a word that would incriminate his friends. Subjected to the torture of the rack, the man at length made a full confession. In that confession Villon was, of course, concerned.



Then there followed the most terrible of all the experiences that happened in the short life of the poet. He was pounced upon, flung into a filthy cell, and subjected to many insults. The water-torture was given him—one of the most painful of all the torments invented by an age that loved cruelty for its own sake. The torture consists in the pouring of gallons of water down the throat of the victim until the lungs are on the point of bursting for need of air. It has been said that the rack itself was a mild punishment compared with this diabolical device !

Villon appears to have endured the agony with greater fortitude than Tabarie, and for a long time the pauses made by the tormentors went unrewarded. Eventually he collapsed and confessed to his part in the robbery. After a perfunctory trial, the poet was sentenced to be hanged and gibbeted.

Let us try and picture Villon at that time when he imagined that he was going to die. His fears must have been appalling. He had no means of spiritual consolation—he believed in nothing—least of all in himself. Picture him in his cell, dark, evil-smelling, airless, except for an opening of approximately three or four square inches. (That airless condition must have been one of the chief horrors of medieval prisons). Did he lie on the stone floor, moving painfully at the end of a chain, with his vividly active brain painting the horrors of the rope and the last struggle ? Or was his mind at that moment moved to memories of former delights ? Or did he, perhaps, think in rhymes, even in that hour of misery, finding solace in the stringing together of words ? From what we know of Villon we must conclude that fear held the high place in his thoughts. His verse probably seemed a

million miles away ! One can imagine a Virgil, a Tasso, solacing himself in the presence of death with things of the mind—but never a Villon.

However, it was written that his career was not to end at that point. An appeal to Parliament, supported by the petitions of his friends at the University, proved successful—and once again he was set free to go into exile for the second time.

The next step in his sordid pilgrimage was to Meung. In 1461, after a long silence, we hear of him again. He had quarrelled with the Bishop of Orleans, and the Bishop had caused him to be imprisoned in a dungeon in the Castle of Meung, where he was fed on bread and water and lay on straw. This imprisonment seems to have affected him even more grievously than his torture and terrible suspense, four years previously, in Paris. He might have remained in the dungeon of Meung throughout his life had not the new King, Louis XI, made a State entry into the town in October 1461. To celebrate the event, all prisoners received an amnesty. Villon went free, but he was now a broken man.

His hair was grey, his figure was shrunken like the figure of an old man, his teeth had dropped out ; he said of himself that he had lived a hundred years ! He was very feeble, too feeble even for vice. Removed thus (for a time, at least) from the temptations which had ruined him, Villon turned his thoughts towards writing and produced the poem that has given him a secure place among the immortals. In some quiet place he wrote his "Grand Testament."

Another gap in his history occurs now. Indeed we may conclude that whenever we know nothing of Villon, the explanation lies in the fact that during that period he



was not coming into direct contact with the authorities. Examine all the dates recorded in the foregoing lines, and with the exception of the date of his birth and his academic degrees, the records are invariably concerned with illegal acts. How should it be otherwise? History does not concern itself with thieves who in their spare hours write verse! What should we know of Turpin, of Jack Sheppard, of all the other heroes of the kitchen, but for the accommodating pages of the Newgate Calendar?

Thus does it happen that once again the record of Villon is blank until the November of the following year, 1462. He was then in gaol for some minor robbery, but the authorities evidently fearing that this charge would not be sufficient to warrant his banishment for life, raked up the old business of the robbery from the College. With stupid reiteration, they again tortured the poet, caused him to utter some further and, perhaps, imaginary confession, and then sentenced him to lifelong exile.

At that point—the beginning of the year 1462—on the 5th of January, Villon left Paris, and as far as history is concerned, he might that day have been buried in some obscure graveyard. For we know absolutely nothing further about him. We do not know where he went, how he lived, whether he stole or whether he reformed. But if we may be guided by conjecture, we may, perhaps, form the theory that he did not live long after he had made his last adieu to his dearly-loved Paris. His health, as we know, was broken—he had nothing for which to live—and he was probably consumptive. It seems a sideways ending to a life that with its few fragments of verse influenced generations to come, but the deities who rule the destinies of men seem ever to have a grudge against poets. They twist the lives of the versifiers, extracting,



perhaps, in the very act of twisting the quintessence of a dream !

Robert Louis Stevenson, whose study of Villon in *Men and Books* is spoiled by a certain spitefulness, has pointed out a certain likeness between Villon and Burns in regard to their work, but although both these men had known sufficient of what is called sin to see it in its true shape and colour, there is a tremendous divergence in the attitude. When Villon moralizes, it is the moralizing of the satiated debauchee on the morning after his debauch—when Burns moralizes, one sees the old Scottish Puritan ancestor leaning over his shoulder. One imagines that Villon in spite of his appetite for life, was often tired—Burns was aflame to the end ! Moreover, there is a certain purity even in the most erotic of the Burns poems—a purity for which we look, in vain, in Villon.

Stevenson speaks also of the insincerity of the man—says that his pathos is the pathos of the professional beggar whining out his lies. Here again Stevenson shows bias and narrow-mindedness. If ever a man wrote out of the fullness of a passionate belief, it was Villon. He was no hypocrite—no poseur in his work, whatever he may have been in his life.

But even Stevenson has not denied that François Villon was the one great writer of his age and nation—that he initiated the modern literature of France. Rabelais owed much to him, and his influence may be traced throughout five hundred years to the present moment. The author of the novel published yesterday in Paris probably owes something to Villon, even though he never read a line of his verse.

Villon's chief charm for modern readers lies, perhaps, in a certain melancholy that reminds one of the fall of

golden leaves in autumn. One feels that if the leaves were black, the sadness would be less. That is Villon's attitude. It is just because life to him is so tremendous a joy that death, surrounding it, is the most terrible of misfortunes.

His world was narrow. There was no room for the spirit. Always he writes of famine, feasts, shame, street-walkers, drunkards, thieves, taverns, graveyards. If ever Villon thought about Christ, he saw Him merely as a man who had failed, nailed to sections of wood !

He had wit, he had humour. Once he said bitterly : " I am omniscient. I know everything—except myself ! " He was tolerant—largely tolerant—but one fancies it was the tolerance of indifference rather than the tolerance of an even mind.

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The uncertainty that must of necessity attach itself to the writings of a vagrant poet in a period of chaos has attached to Villon. Of the authenticity of " *Le Jargon*," a long poem, written in the slang of thieves, we are not positive, and the same doubt has arisen concerning several other poems. But that he wrote " *Le Petit Testament*," and subsequently " *Le Grand Testament*," is certain for two reasons—firstly, because both poems are largely autobiographical and refer to events in his life ; secondly, because their style and diction could have belonged only to him.

" *Le Petit Testament* " is a very brief work—it consists only of a few hundreds of lines. In this poem the writer bequeaths mocking legacies to friends and enemies. Mordantly he hits off their defects, their weaknesses.



He shows a mordant—a terrible humour in the irony of bequests.

“Le Grand Testament,” written after his harsh experience in the dungeon at Meung, is a more elaborate piece of work. It is, perhaps, the most extraordinary mingling of experience and mordant philosophizing ever presented in verse.

The “Testament” begins with a malediction on his old enemy, the Bishop of Orleans. Then there follow lamentations for his life—excuses, self-pity, remorse. If his luck had been better, says Villon, he would have been a better man. . . . He rails against fortune—he speaks of wasted days. Perhaps he felt that he was about to die soon, for over all this litany there is a greyness which is the twilight of life.

He proceeds to enumerate certain legacies. After a vilification of Katherine de Vausselles, his old love, he bequeaths his body to mother earth. “The worms will have a good meal,” he adds. His library (a few dog-eared books, perhaps), he leaves to his benefactor, Guillaume Villon. He wills his garden (an imaginary affair, of course) to a friend on condition that he repairs a door and mends a gable. He leaves a prayer to one friend, a red ass to another, an imaginary mare to a third. Some sinister meaning, doubtless, attached to these legacies, but we shall never know the real significance.

These versified bequests in eight-line stanzas are interspersed with the ballads that are so peculiarly the essential Villon.

There is the “Ballade des Temps Jadis”—touched with universal sorrow. “Mais, ou sont les neiges d’antan ?” is the refrain, and that line in its English rendering is, perhaps, all of Villon that is known to the average man



and woman in Great Britain. In this ballad, the poet reviews the beautiful women of bygone years, Helen, Thais, and the rest. Greater than emperors were these women, he sighs, but they are gone! "Where are the snows of yesteryear?"

Then there is the sister ballad of the "Seigneurs des Temps Jadis." Here he writes of the kings, churchmen, heroes, who have passed down the centuries and suddenly gone—whither? "So much carries the wind away," he sings, and so pursues his constant task of celebrating the futility of life—and the tears of things.

The "Ballade of la Grosse Margot" is a terrible thing. We have already spoken of Villon in the rôle of "souteneur," and in this poem he describes the "ménage" carried on by Margot and himself. She brings home her chance lovers. He waits on them at table, brings them food and wine, and is very respectful. When the lovers have loved, paid and gone, then he and Margot have time for their own caresses. There is a bitterness running through this strange poem which proves that Villon was no contented "souteneur"—that he probably hated himself as much as he hated the woman on whom he sponged. "This is the house where we keep our state," he writes with fine irony, and we can imagine him croaking out a sob-laugh as he held the pen.

There is, also, the "Ballade de la Vielle Heaulmiere"—"Heaulmiere" stands for "armouress," and it was a custom of "filles-de-joie" of old times to call themselves by the names of respectable trades. There was probably a sort of irony in the idea.

In this ballad the "armouress," grown old, toothless and miserable, bewails her former beauties. With a realism which French writers since the day of Villon

have copied, this defeated love-seller describes her body and her face as they were in the days of her youth when she had lovers in plenty. Every limb is named ; indeed, so intimate are the details that the discreet Mr. Vere Stacpoole, in a very excellent translation, has seen fit to omit certain words.

Of this poem Stevenson has said that it is a man talking all the time—that no woman could have thought as “ Fat Peg ” is made to think. But one imagines that there is always a certain masculinity of thought in the brains of this class of woman. Moreover, the woman of many light loves is thrown so frequently into the society of men of all sorts and conditions that her tendency of thought might easily come to assume a masculine colour.

Of the other ballads, perhaps the most vital (and certainly the most sordid) is the exhortation of a worn-out woman of pleasure to her young pupils. She impresses upon them the Horatian maxim, “ Carpe diem ! ” in a very literal and practical sense. They are to get as much gold as possible from their lovers, for the night comes, when hair greys, when teeth fall out, when cheeks collapse—when necks shrink and grow yellow.

The “ Ballade des Pendus ” is a piece of despairing, rather than of fierce realism. Villon came very near to being hanged in his own person ; he was able to realize the emotions of the condemned. Read this poem in a sensitive mood, and you experience a feeling of despair of humanity. Nothing matters ! Better, you feel, that the race should perish than that this race of men should go on. Villon must have been in a suicidal mood when he wrote the poem, but like many men who know those moods intensely, he never attempted the act of suicide.

The religious spirit conspicuously absent from the



other work of Villon, is exhibited in the ballad written for his mother. Perhaps he did not feel an ounce of the emotion, but he knew that it would please his mother, for whom he undoubtedly held much love. Or, perhaps, the Villon of many moods may have been caught up for twenty minutes or half an hour in a thrill of religious ecstasy.

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These ten—these “Testaments”—these ballads, and a few poems which may or may not have been the work of Villon, constitute his claim to the remembrance of those who love the written word if it be written well. Few poets, perhaps, have won so enduring a place with so little actual work to their credit, but it is for his influence on subsequent French literature, rather than for his recorded labours, that this poet holds his place among the immortals.

Within ten years of his last exit from Paris, at a time when printing was in its earliest stage, no less than ten editions of the works of François Villon were in circulation. A large literature has been made round his poems. Sainte-Beuve wrote a memorable essay for his “*Causeries de Luni*” in a famous French journal of the early nineteenth century. M. Longdon published an excellent biography in 1877. The late Marcel Schwob discovered certain new documents concerning the poet, but died before he could complete his work, which was posthumously published as recently as 1905.

To Stevenson's essay we have already referred. Swinburne translated several of the poems, and Rossetti, always an enthusiast concerning Villon, translated more than one ballad, preserving the original flavour very



beautifully. Perhaps the most admirable translation of the entire body of Villon's authentic works, however, is the version presented by John Payne for the Villon Society. It has been said that a poet is needed to translate a poet, and Mr. Payne has stood the test. The English reader, innocent of a syllable of French, will gain from this translation a vivid and more than adequate idea of the fantastic charm of the original. It is an amazing thing that this ragged poet, whose entire works would not equal in length two plays of Corneille or Racine, has nevertheless secured translators who have done him a justice in the English language never accorded to those two heroes of the Classic and Romantic schools. Life was unkind to Villon—let us be thankful that his translators have been more indulgent than life and shown him a tenderness that he never knew in the flesh.





NINON DE LENCLOS



# Ninon de Lenclos

(1620—1706)

**I**T is difficult for a writer to write with the restraint imposed by twentieth-century taste of such a woman as Ninon de Lenclos. For the enthusiasm of the literary temperament must necessarily take fire as it looks upon this fight with the age-old enemies of man, time and death. The sins of Ninon are forgotten when one remembers her vitality, her courage, her philosophy.

It was a marriage of convenience (of the sort that has always been more frequent in Latin countries than in Teutonic lands) that brought about the birth in 1620 of this extraordinary woman. The father of Ninon was a gay, irresponsible soldier, filled with the Epicurean philosophy of life. The mother was a good but narrow-minded "religieuse"—and it was perhaps the revolt from the gloomy asceticism of her mother that drove Ninon to the hedonism that spends the day and takes no thought for the morrow.

Indeed, so keen was her dislike of formal religion, that we find her at the age of ten writing to her father: "I am sure I shall fall ill if I am forced to go to the church every morning. I especially hate Mass because it is so late before I can get breakfast. . . ." In those lines this infant of ten crystallized views that remained unaltered to the end of her days. Always it was "breakfast" and the world, rather than asceticism and the spirit.

Her formal education was apparently neglected, but she taught herself. Before Ninon was twenty, she was a wit, a philosopher, a speaker of many languages. To her father she was devoted, and to him she owed not only her gay philosophy of life, but a great part of her education.

As a child her ambition was masculine—she wanted

to be a soldier. Once, Monsieur de Lenclos dressed her as a boy and took her with him to camp at Tours, where his brother-officers did not for a moment suspect her sex. Ninon enjoyed the rough life of the army, and in after years often said that those days were the most vividly joyous of her memory.

The work begun by Epicurus was developed by assiduous reading of Michel de Montaigne. Her father gave her the essays, telling the girl that they would form an excellent guide for existence. There is no doubt that the subsequent character and deeds of Ninon were enormously influenced by Montaigne. She loved him for his candour, his hatred of convention, and for his cynicism. The writer who could confess boldly that he owned all the major vices and was proud of the possession seemed to her a personage worth consideration.

Armand Jean Duplessis, the Cardinal de Richelieu, was at the highest point of his power when Ninon made her entrance into the great world. He was virtually ruler of France, for the King, Louis XIII, was little more than a pliant and easy-going weapon in the hand of the churchman. Richelieu had involved France in many small wars, and at the time of Ninon's debut, the Spaniards were on the point of invading Paris. The attack was repelled by a concerted action of the people, the King himself heading a huge army.

It was characteristic of Paris society that it could carry on its frivolities and its vanities with an enemy at its gates. Ninon's debut was therefore as smooth, as successful as it might have been in a secure and peaceful city.

It was, perhaps, unfortunate that the first lover of this woman who, in after years, was to enjoy a long succession of lovers, should have proved a blackguard and a brute.



For apart from her Epicurean point of view, this experience may have hardened the girl, and enhanced her cynicism. This man—the Chevalier de Saint-Etienne—who was the first to enjoy her kisses, made the usual proposals of marriage, but incontinently vanished before they could be ratified. Ninon, however, showed small vexation. She said that henceforth she would live as a man lives—that she would recognize no moral restraint. At this time she was not yet twenty years old. Perhaps we may look upon Ninon as the first pioneer of woman's moral emancipation !

To another lover, La Chartre, who had to leave her to join his regiment, she promised eternal fealty and even signed a formal declaration that she would be entirely true to him. Within a day or two she had given herself to another youth and was making a pun on the name of the soon-to-be-forgotten La Chartre. For Gaspard de Coligny her passion was deeper, but by no means long-lived.

Her father had now established Ninon herself in a house in the Marais quarter of Paris. In those days the Marais was one of the most distinguished districts of the city, but long since it has cast off its bright colours and descended to shabby gentility or mere squalor. To this house there came nobles, soldiers, priests, wits, authors, poets, artists, everybody who was celebrated and a few who were simply notorious. Scarron, the witty poet, was a constant visitor. Ninon formed a long friendship with that deformed genius. With Madame Scarron (who afterwards became Madame de Maintenon) she was also on terms of great intimacy.

A writer who met Ninon at that time when she was living in the Marais, describes her as being very beautiful,



with perfect figure, limbs and skin, with gold hair, eyelashes of amazing length, a good nose, and a graceful chin. He adds that her character was the "sweetest" that man could conceive.

That Ninon was undoubtedly "sweet" in the conventional sense one may feel certain, but added to that amiability was a deliberate philosophical decision to make the best of this world, since there was, perhaps, no other world to follow it.

Moreover, we know that she was never in the least degree hard or mercenary. It may be said, of course, that she had no cause to be grasping, for throughout her life money was invariably plentiful, but freedom from financial stress is not always an excluder of avarice. It says much for her character that she was at all times as ready to love a hard-up soldier, poet or player as an indecently wealthy aristocrat or bourgeois.

When acquaintances reproached her for this unbusiness-like attitude, she would say lightly :

"I take the man who happens to please me at the moment. I drop him when he grows wearisome."

Ninon was always logical. She justified her behaviour by pointing out that it was founded on her belief that love between men and women was a purely sensuous emotion, entirely devoid of spiritual value. In other words, a love affair meant little more than a delightful lunch or dinner ! But friendship she cherished above all things, and said once that friendship between man and woman could begin only when love ended.

Naturally, many men would have wished to marry this amazingly attractive personage, but marriage was the last thing on earth that she contemplated. It savoured too much of bondage for the irresponsible soul of Ninon.

Restraint of any sort maddened her. It pained her to see a bird in a cage. More than once she enraged friends whose houses she was visiting by taking advantage of their momentary absence to open cages and give canaries and linnets their freedom.

But if Ninon was a gay and incontinent lover, she was also at least a generous and magnanimous creature, for we are told that she never showed spite or envy or bitterness. Sometimes it happened (though very, very rarely) that a man left Ninon too soon—when she would gladly have retained him a little longer. Instead, however, of reproaching the inconstant one, she would say that his behaviour was quite natural and that in similar circumstances she would have behaved in precisely the same way. They would then part on the kindest of terms, Ninon actually wishing him “*Bonne fortune*” with his next love! A good sportswoman, this Ninon, and perhaps many men, entangled with more sentimental mistresses, would wish that her sex held more of her breed.

Richelieu, that most cynical, most critical of woman lovers, was for a time one of her companions, but the affair was a short one. That cold-blooded egotist probably never really cared for any person but himself. His mistress, Marion Delorme, was one of Ninon's chief friends, and the queerly assorted trio often met whilst the later liaison with Ninon was in progress.

The hard element of Ninon's composition was confined to her love affairs. In all the other relations of life she was passionately emotional. When Scarron lay paralyzed and almost past coherent speech, she abandoned all her engagements to go and sit beside him—not once a month, or once a week, but every day. Although it is possible



that she hated the signs of sickness as much as any healthy person, she conquered any aversion of the kind, and cheered the broken poet by reciting to him his own verses. Poor Scarron in that sad time would probably have been alone had not Ninon come to him. The sick man is rarely overwhelmed with visitors.

Her mother Ninon saw only at long intervals. As we know, there was small sympathy in that direction, but when Madame de Lenclos was in her last illness, Ninon was with her, nursing the dying woman, not only with devotion, but with a genius for saying the very thing that would most surely comfort a religious person. Herself caring only for the pagan side of life—disliking Christianity because she held that it was the creed of the slave and the afflicted—Ninon nevertheless was ready to play the part of an ardent theologian in order to bring comfort to Madame de Lenclos.

After the death of her mother, Ninon seems to have been caught up in a kind of fever of remorse for some neglect in past days. Overcome by this emotion, she actually announced her intention of entering an Ursuline convent. Her friends were at first amused, incredulous—the idea of the Ninon of many lovers and countless frivolities pacing out her days behind convent walls seemed to them absurd and incongruous. But Ninon was in earnest, and very soon was established among the nuns.

They could not do without her, the many people to whom she had come to mean a great deal, and they wrote to her letter after letter, begging her to abandon the religious life, for which (they pointed out) she was decidedly unsuited. “A fish out of water would be a perfectly satisfied creature compared with yourself in a



convent for all your life," suggested one of the correspondents. Ninon after a time saw the force of the suggestions. She left the convent and went back to the active service of Eros.

A moderate, but quite adequate income left to Ninon by her mother enabled her to live in comfort. She took a house in the Rue des Tournelles, once a street of some distinction in old Paris but to-day a neglected, forgotten place. Here she entertained everybody, and continued to flit from lover to lover with the gay incontinence of a woman who found in each successive affair a thrill and a novel experience.

It was, indeed, an amazing life this life of Ninon de Lenclos, because it seemed as though it was fated to be all light, without a shadow to bring her existence into line with the lives of ordinary mortals. At a later stage, however, the shadow fell.

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In the career of such a woman as Ninon, it was inevitable that awkward domestic problems should from time to time arise to vex herself and her friends. For instance, there was an occasion of the kind when a child was about to be born to her, for two lovers disputed as to the parentage, each desiring to be the father of the babe of so illustrious and charming a mother. Here was a pretty puzzle—how was it to be solved? Ninon herself, with her practical brain, soon saw a method. She suggested that the rival fathers should cast lots for the infant. This was done, and the child whose male parent was assigned to him in this unusual (and perhaps unique) fashion, lived to enjoy a happy and successful life.

Unlike many women of her circle, Ninon held herself

aloof from politics, which she probably regarded as a solemn farce. Her indifference to public affairs brought about an episode that cost her the friendship of Richelieu. It happened thus :

Richelieu growing daily more powerful—Louis growing daily more lethargic, the Cardinal's tyranny manifested itself so grossly that France was packed with persons who would gladly have brought about his death. There were many plots to kill him—to protect himself he had spies in all quarters ; many of these spies were women. Suddenly it occurred to Richelieu that Ninon, with her numberless friends in all ranks of society, would form an ideal detective. He sent for her and made a proposal. He pointed out that he would pay her a huge sum if she would undertake a certain espionage for him. He flattered her by saying that her beauty and wit would enable her to win secrets from men that they would withhold from other people.

To the disgust and horror of Richelieu, who had set his heart on engaging this attractive spy, Ninon said " No " to the offer and said it in furious words. Apart from the fact that she was entirely uninterested in matters of the kind, her honest nature, clear as crystal, a nature that would always place all its cards on the table, revolted from the dirty trade. Richelieu, the most vindictive of men, never forgave her for this refusal, and indeed in the time that followed tried by many specious tricks to injure the courtesan, who had taught him a lesson in honesty, rarely imparted by one of her profession. His tricks failed, fortunately, and Ninon went her way joyously, irresponsibly.

Sometimes she would say that she wanted to live forever and to love forever, or at least until she was very,



very old. This record will show how far Ninon was able to satisfy her ambition.

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Soon after the birth of the child whose parentage had been decided by an appeal to chance, Ninon received a visit that remained in her memory to her last hour. There came one day to the house in the Rue des Tournelles an old man, bearded, mystical. He told her that he had been brought there by tales of her beauty and persistent youthfulness—moreover, that he was prepared to assure her one of three things—riches, fame or everlasting youth and loveliness. The magician, who called himself “Le Noctambule,” produced his magic tablets and on them Ninon wrote the words of her choice. She had chosen characteristically enough the gifts of youth and beauty. It has been suggested that this mysterious visitor was in all probability the notorious “Comte de Saint-Germain,” who for a long time delighted and amazed fashionable society in many capitals of Europe by his weird performances and apparent powers of prophecy. It is possible he was merely a specious, but unusually clever swindler !

Ninon, however, was enormously impressed by the affair, and one must believe that the “Magician’s” words may have played some part in her wonderful continuity of youth. For just as a so-called “mascot” in which one firmly believes may act as a tonic-force and thus bring good fortune, so may a prediction of a certain achievement help towards its fulfilment.

Exhilarated, encouraged by the prophecy, she now smiled upon her lovers with redoubled fascination. Among the many men whom she entertained for a few



months were the Marquis de Sevigné (a son of the famous Madame de Sevigné of the "Letters"), the Duc d'Enghien, afterwards the Prince de Condé, and the witty Duke de la Rochefoucauld, who loved her theoretically for a space and platonically for the rest of his life. Sevigné at a later time was killed in a duel. Ninon was in despair for a few weeks, but soon recovered and found another distraction. Her nature, aided by the Epicurean philosophy, was essentially hopeful, optimistic. Her perfect health aided her attitude towards life. A good liver is probably a more frequent aid to optimism than a good conscience. "Repentance," said a cynic, "is sometimes only an acute attack of indigestion."

It must not be imagined that Ninon went her way without arousing a certain indignation and envy. Men always loved her, but women naturally could not look with satisfaction upon this light-hearted courtesan who took from them their husbands and their lovers with as light a hand as she took a rose from a vase. There must have been many secret rages concerning Ninon de Lenclos—many open quarrels. Eventually a number of powerful ladies begged the Queen-Mother, Anne of Austria, to send her into a sort of home for penitents. Ninon, hearing of this matter, laughingly suggested that they should send her instead to a monastery, as she would feel more at home there. The order for her removal was issued, but was never executed.

Some time before this episode, Louis XIII had died, and had been succeeded by his infant son. Richelieu also had passed, and in his place was a new autocrat, the Cardinal Mazarin. A rebellion against the tyranny of Mazarin broke out, and Monsieur de Lenclos joined the opponents of the Throne and of the Cardinal. Ninon,

always a loyalist, would have nothing to do with the rebellious party of the Frondists (as they styled themselves) and was horrified by the action of her father. In order to mark her resentment of his action, she left Paris with her latest lover, Le Marquis de Villarceaux and lived in the country for three years, several children being born to her from that Arcadian encounter.

Later, when the Frondist troubles had worn themselves out, she went back to Paris and was reconciled with the old man, who was in an ecstasy of delight. He told her that those three years of separation had been the most unhappy of his life. This love of De Lenclos for Ninon was, perhaps, the one affection of his life that was not purely sensuous. An Epicurean and a materialist, he had no use for domestic amenities.

But now it was decided that this reconciliation was to be followed by a parting of a longer time than the first, for presently a certain personage, whose name was never spoken by M. de Lenclos, because he heartily disliked it, had an important assignation with the worn-out old roué. Monsieur le Mort came for him, but before he died De Lenclos spoke several maxims to his daughter. "Make the most of every hour, I implore you," said the dying Epicurean. "And remember that whilst you need not agitate yourself too much concerning the number of your pleasures, be very careful about their choice." He then said that he himself had found life too brief to get from it as much enjoyment as he would have wished.

Ninon mourned her father sincerely enough, but her mourning did not interfere with her diversions. The "affaire" with Villarceaux beginning to wane, she gladly gave him up to Madame Scarron, her dearest friend. There followed a long procession. Men of low birth—



men of high birth—soldiers, sailors, merchants—poets—artists—actors—the strong and the weak—the halt and the lame—all were welcome to her, if she could find in them something that would hold her attention for an hour, a day or a week. She is reported to have said frequently that she had never in all her career entertained a man merely for the money, or gifts, that he might present to her, and it is more than possible that the boast was justified.

At an earlier stage, the removal of Ninon from the society which she was said to be demoralizing had been attempted by women. That attempt failed. But presently the Church took up the battle. The clergy clamoured for her removal to a convent. Her success—her amazing health—were distasteful to the clerics, who would naturally have preferred what is called a “terrible example.” Had Ninon shown signs of deterioration and sickness—had the wage of sin taken the shape of pain or poverty, then all would have been well, and they would in all probability have troubled their consciences little regarding this successful courtesan. The clergy, foaming with righteous indignation, said that not merely was Ninon living a scandalous life, but her success was leading other women to follow her example.

Again Anne of Austria was asked to interfere. By command of that pliant ruler, Ninon was again ordered to retire into a convent. To that place she went, resigned but certainly not penitent. She would, perhaps, have remained there for many years, if not till the end of life, had not another Queen intervened. For it happened that Queen Christina of Sweden was at that time visiting Paris. She had heard much of the amazing Ninon de Lenclos, and said that she must see the woman of whom report spoke with such enthusiasm. To the convent



at Lagny went the enterprising Queen, who was sufficiently important to ignore conventions.

It would have been an interesting interview to record—that interview between a Queen and a courtesan, and it is a matter for regret that we know very little of the details. We are only told that Christina was so enchanted with Ninon that she went away promising to do all that was possible to influence Anne in her favour. The Queen-Mother yielded to her petition, and very soon the fortunate Ninon returned gay, unruffled, to the world that had missed her with huge regret.

And now the salon in the Rue des Tournelles became a place to which everybody of importance sought an entrance. Ninon had gained a reputation as a wit, and her latest “ mot ” was invariably hurried round Paris by the person lucky enough to hear it. Her wit was spontaneous as the foam of the sea. Indeed it was said of her that she frequently forgot her “ mots ” until they were recalled to her by some other person. To give a long catalogue of these impromptu comments on life would prove a wearisome thing. Let us be content with eight :

“ It needs far more intelligence,” said Ninon, “ to make love successfully than to command many armies.”

“ Love is a tiring game, but one always returns to it ! ”

“ The woman who has only loved once does not know what love means.”

“ Let us never speak ill of our enemies, for they are the only people who never deceive us.”

“ One can forgive infidelity, but never deceit ! ”

“ When I think of that man ” (said Ninon, in speaking of a very unattractive gentleman), “ I feel that God must have repented after making him ! ”

"Women are illogical. They will forgive a man for being in the wrong, but never for being in the right."

"When I visit a town, men greet me as a queen—women as a plague!"

\* \* \*

So, for a long time, the life of this woman ran its course, so gay, so untroubled, that one would have said that the Fates had overlooked her—had let her slip by unharmed. It has been said that no one escapes, but Ninon apparently had experienced the miracle. Then there came tragedy—tragedy of the Greek sort, with the strain of the "Ædipus Rex" running throughout the story.

The blow came to her when she was nearly fifty-two. Whilst staying at her little country house at Pipcus, she met a youth with whom she fell in love in her careless way. The boy was white-hot with passion—he sought Ninon morning, noon and night. All was going well and Ninon was enjoying her new conquest, when she discovered by some accident that this youth was her son. Nineteen or twenty years before, a baby born to herself and a M. de Jazay had been sent into the country to be brought up by a nurse. She knew now beyond all question that the boy who was making love to her was that child.

She came near to putting an end to her life, through shame and horror, when she found out. Immediately Ninon sent for the young man, and tried to disillusionize him. She said that not only had she ceased to care for him, but that he was absurd to make love to a woman who might in a few years more reach the grandmother stage.

It was useless, this strategy. The boy grew more passionate, wanted to take her in his arms, and Ninon,

who would have revelled in the joy of receiving the kisses of a son, was forced to repel the kisses of another sort.

One does not wish to linger long over a situation of this kind. Let it be said briefly that Ninon, finding that no power on earth could drive away the boy from her, sent for the father and told him what had happened. M. de Jazay immediately said that there was only one course to be followed. Seeing that persuasion and that strategy had failed, she must follow the only course that remained to her. She must tell the boy the exact truth concerning herself and himself.

For a time Ninon held back. It must have been a horrible ordeal for this light-hearted creature, who, year after year, had gone her way meeting no greater tragedy than an ill-cooked dinner or an ill-tempered servant, to be forced to reveal to her son this story. But her character, though gay, was strong. She sent for him, took him to her room, and broke the news.

To her amazement, the young man seemed more dazed than shocked. He listened with apparent calmness to her words, and when she had finished, begged her not to cry. . . . She was not to blame, he said—she must comfort herself. As for himself, he wanted to be alone for a little time to get even with himself. . . .

She let him go. Half an hour later he was found in some woods near the house, quite dead. He had stabbed himself to death with his sword. . . . A Greek tragedy with a true Roman end !

\* \* \*

In the years that followed, Ninon de Lenclos went on loving because it was an essential part of her nature to love many men—because she was of that stuff that craves



for, and prays for, vivid sensuous emotions, and must otherwise perish.

Whenever the memory of the dead face in the woods came back to her, she tried to shut it out, holding that life is life and has no business with death. But the inherent tenderness and kindliness of her character were deepened—she did many acts of generosity, forgave many injuries.

Ninon never hardened into the glazed image that is the professional courtesan. Even as her skin throughout the years retained its softness and its colour unaided by artifice, so did her nature—her soul—call it what you will, remain sweet, unpainted. The mercenary bargaining, the calculating adding-up of settlements, was not for her. She continued to take the men who pleased her, and the gifts were always low down in the scale of her appreciation. She was no fool—she did not despise money, but she loved much and knew that money is only an approximation. “Gold is only worth gold—love’s worth love!” That was the gospel of Ninon, and never did she waver in her allegiance to her faith.

Her chief impulse in the later years of her extraordinary existence was to keep youth and beauty to the last day. Sometimes she said that if she lived to be eighty she would yet find a man to fall at her feet and beg that he might be privileged to love her. She held the view that the will is capable of any achievement—that a man or woman can, by mere pressure of will power, stave off age and even death.

Her prediction was fulfilled. For when at length the years had come to fullness and Ninon was within a few months of the age of eighty, a young priest, the Abbé Gedoy, actually fell in love with this woman whose

years would have enabled her to fill the rôle of grandmother. At that time, however, Ninon, relying very little on the help of cosmetics or other artificial things, seemed hardly more than a well-preserved woman of thirty-five or forty ! She was alert, very graceful, bright, without any weakness of age. Her eyes, we are told, sparkled—her lips, untouched by paint, were scarlet. Once in a thousand years Nature sets out to work a miracle, and she succeeded with Ninon de Lenclos. It was as if Nature had said to Time : “ You are clever, but not clever enough. Away with your wrinkles and your crowsfeet and your parchmenting of flesh. Here is my darling—this woman—who by her will and by her capacity for love has beaten you back ! ”

Her spirit was young as her flesh. She was as ready to make love as to be loved. She smiled upon the young priest, told him that he might look forward some day to winning her, and that he must be patient. Day after day he came to her house, asking Ninon why she delayed his happiness.

“ If you love me as you say, why keep me in this state of suspense ? ” he asked her over and over again, but always she sent him away, unsatisfied.

Ninon had her reason. In spite of the fact that each day as it passed rendered the priest more haggard, more feverish, she refused to let him hold her in his arms until at length there arrived the 15th of May, 1700.

On that morning, she sent for him. He came and found her rooms gay with gifts. She was in high spirits, dancing up and down the apartment like a schoolgirl. Her eyes flamed with joy. As he came into the room, she held out her hand and told him that the moment for which he



longed had arrived. She was ready to love and to be loved.

A little later, as they sat together, she told him why she had delayed.

“ Mon ami ! I am to-day eighty years old ! It is my birthday. You see, I wanted to be able to boast in after years that I had a very dear lover on the day that I was eighty ! ”

The affair that was thus celebrated on her birthday continued for many months. Eventually, it was ended, not by the man, but by the woman, who once again had grown weary of her lover.

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Soon after the end of this adventure, a serious illness seized Ninon. When she recovered she said soberly that henceforth she would take more care of her health, and would love with discretion. She abandoned many of the frivolities which she had enjoyed, and went to bed every night at ten, saying that sleep was the fountain of youth.

Throughout the last five years of her life, Ninon de Lenclos contrived to live without lovers. None knew better than herself that the end was now approaching, but she was able to look upon death with the calm eyes of the Epicurean. The Epicurean philosopher held that the man who is leaving life should regard his exit as the diner at the first table regards his meal. He has eaten and drunk—he has enjoyed—he has finished. Now let him make room for someone else.

Ninon was ready to make room. None had lived so full a life. None had enjoyed each hour more exquisitely than this sinner of whom it was said that she never spoke



an unkind syllable of any man, or woman, and never willingly inflicted a moment's sorrow on any living thing.

On the 17th of October, 1706, Ninon, after a brief illness, turned her face to the wall and with all her faculties alight—with every feature clear and beautiful—passed from a world that had never wearied her, dying, they said, as lightly as the rose-leaf falls to the earth when summer has ended.

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A writer who writes as I have written of Ninon de Lenclos will be accused of sentimentality, but it is hard to avoid that vice when dealing with this woman. Un-sentimental herself, she nevertheless drives one to think of her in terms of emotion.

Those who have read these lines dealing with the erotic experiences of Ninon might easily imagine that here was merely a woman of pleasure, whose only claim to distinction was that she lived longer than other women of her kind and made a success of her venture. This impression would be brutally misleading. For Ninon, undoubtedly through the later years of her long life, exercised a power and an influence over all sorts and conditions of people that touched the power of and influence of a royal leader. Louis XIV came to look upon her, that he might see this remarkable creature, and Voltaire, who was presented to her as a small boy, wrote about her in such manner that her place in history has been assured.

In the years that followed her death, Ninon became something of a tradition. There sprung up many volumes of "Letters," bearing her name. One book bore the portentous title *The Secret Correspondence of Ninon de Lenclos and Le Marquis de Villarceaux and Madame de*

*Maintenon*. An impudent forgery, this ! Another volume held her supposed letters to Le Marquis de Sevigné. This also was a forgery. Indeed, if we may believe the assurance of Voltaire (a very sound authority), we may conclude that the letters to Evremonde are the only genuine remains of Ninon. Her friendship with that exiled author was, perhaps, the dominant thing in her life, for as we know, friendship was with Ninon the better part of love.

One uses the word "courtesan" concerning her, but she was a Helen rather than an Aspasia. That she received many gifts from her lovers is tolerably certain, but she never sold herself as the courtesan sells. The cheap jests spoken of the woman of pleasure were never spoken of Ninon. To her house there came everyone of good repute in France. One man wrote of her : "Whatever she thought, was well thought. . . . Her house was a house to which honourable men came, and she herself was ever the most honourable. . . ."

In recent years much has been written about Ninon, and it has been suggested that certain of the episodes recorded in the foregoing lines were legendary. The episode of the love affair on her eightieth birthday has been dismissed by some historians as a pretty story, that could hardly have had foundation in fact, seeing that her attractions had waned long before that time. The episode of the tragedy in the wood has also been questioned. But the fact remains that Ninon must have been a unique personage—otherwise, these fables, if indeed they are fables, would hardly have attached themselves to her history. History at best is always a vague business, and the discerning reader must judge for himself as to what he will accept or reject,

However, whether certain incidents be real or legendary, one thing is certain. The life and death of Ninon de Lenclos form an everlasting tribute to the Epicurean philosophy—a philosophy, which, rightly understood and rightly practised, will give a mortal happiness and health—a full life and an easy death !



# Aphra Behn

1640-1689

**I**T has been said by certain cynics (people who must not be taken too seriously) that the women novelists who write licentious fictions are themselves respectable persons who wish to gain a vicarious thrill by setting down the experiences of other persons less virtuous.

This suggestion, however, could hardly have been made in the case of Aphra Amis, who afterwards became Mrs. Aphra Behn. For, here was a woman who experienced all sorts of erotic adventures—whose love affairs were, perhaps, as many as her fictions. But we are chiefly interested in Aphra Behn three hundred years after her birth, not because she was a passionate lover—not because she produced a series of mediocre novels, plays and poems, but because she was the first woman writer in this country who earned a living by the profession of letters.

The career of Aphra is beset at many points by opposing rumours and statements. It has been said by some that her parentage was very humble—that her father was a barber. Others have written that Mr. Amis was a yeoman of substance—and that soon after Aphra was born (at Wye near Canterbury), the family went out to Surinam, where Amis had gained a Government appointment. She was a nervous child, untidy, generous, affectionate. She began to write verses as soon as she could hold a pen.

Mr. Amis died during the voyage to Surinam. Nevertheless, the family settled there for some time, but their means of living in that place has not been indicated in detail in the *Life and Memoirs of Aphra Behn*, from which the data is taken. Moreover, we must be on our guard as to the accuracy of those records. It is possible that many



APHRA BEHN





inventions have grown into the *Memoirs*. It has even been suggested that the Surinam journey was a myth—and that all that followed the journey was a part of Aphra's imaginative scheme. Miss Sackville West, however, one of the most brilliant of commentators on Mrs. Behn, is inclined to believe that the main episodes of the Surinam adventure are more or less accurate.

In her recent analytic study, *Mrs. Aphra Behn, The Incomparable Astrea*, she puts forward some highly cogent reasons for this belief.

Let us agree, then, with Miss Sackville West, and let us assume that Surinam DID happen. We must then go on to record how in that place Aphra met a heroic young negro, a son of a certain King Coramantien, who had been sold as a slave by a treacherous relative. The youth was in love with a slave-girl of his own colour in Surinam. On this episode, Aphra founded her novel, *Oroonoko, The Royal Slave*. However, the story was not written until many years later. It is, perhaps, this tardiness that has caused certain critics to throw discredit on the alleged visit to Surinam. For they ask quite reasonably—why did she delay the novel to so late a time when the natural assumption was that if the events had really entered her experience, she would have set them down within a few months, or at least, within a few years of their actual performance?

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The family returned to England, settled in London, where Aphra, at the age of twenty, met and married a certain Mr. Behn, a rich Dutch merchant. After the marriage, she was presented at the Court of Charles II. The usual rumours concerning Charles have arisen in

connection with him and Mrs. Behn, but there is no evidence whatever that there was any kind of intimacy between the King and the potential novelist.

Relations between England and Holland at that time, as we know, were more than strained. Perhaps it was due to that circumstance that when Behn died suddenly, his estate was found to be practically valueless. The widow was now without any kind of resources. Her mother was alive, but herself too poor to give her assistance.

It is possible that her imaginative roving temperament suggested to her the course which she soon proceeded to take. Spies were required for service in Holland—women spies were preferred to men, because they were able to make love to important personages and sometimes secure those secrets in intimate moments. Aphra, young, good-looking, resourceful, clever, seemed to the authorities the very woman for the work. She was dispatched to Holland in 1666, and seems to have done her work with zeal and with discretion. In her letters to the home Government she signed herself by the pseudonym of "Astrea"—a name that she clung to in the years that followed.

The excitement of the life of a secret service agent was supplemented by an adventure with another agent, a young man called Scott. Aphra was of those women who must fill every hour with experience. If she was not seeking out naval plans, or writing novels, she must of necessity make love or receive it. For Scott she formed a tremendous, if not enduring, passion. That she gave herself without reserve we may feel tolerably certain. She was no bargainer—her business talents were so poor that she could not even make a good bargain with the Government for whom she was spying. Again and again



she wrote home asking for payments that were due to her. The letters were ignored. At length she wrote direct to Lord Arlington, the Foreign Minister. She was at the end of her tether, she told him—heavily in debt, almost without the money for her board and lodging. Arlington, for some occult reason, left her desperate appeal unacknowledged !

Rumour assures us that in addition to Scott, there were two other lovers during the Holland period. If rumour spoke truthfully, one must imagine that those lovers were hard-up as herself or were exceptionally penurious. The latter possibility is the more probable—for throughout her life, poor Aphra gave more than she received. There is even the likelihood that the men may have sponged upon her, taking advantage of the exaggerated good-nature that was her characteristic feature.

No money came from England. She grew sick of the spying trade, which she had never liked—which she had undertaken simply as a means of livelihood. Having borrowed the sum of £150 from an acquaintance, Mr. Butler, Aphra returned to London early in 1667. She came back to a city that was slowly recovering from plague and fire.

Butler seems to have behaved very badly. That Aphra had some claim on him we may feel assured—otherwise, why did he advance the money ? Nevertheless, when a certain time had passed and she had been unable to repay the loan, the callous brute stormed and bullied. He threatened her with a debtor's prison. Aphra made frantic efforts to raise the amount, but failed.

Butler kept his word ! Mrs. Behn was flung into prison. Debtors' prisons in those days (and even as late as the early nineteenth century) were filthy dens, insanitary, dark, sometimes verminous. The conditions



were horrible, but there was freedom amounting even to licence. Dicing, card playing, drinking, and immoral promiscuity, went on undisturbed by the warders, who themselves frequently took part in the diversions.

Fortunately for Aphra Behn, she had in her mental fabric a thick mass of coarseness that enabled her to endure her surroundings not only with resignation, but with a certain relish. She studied her fellow-prisoners with delight—she picked up a large amount of what is called “copy”—perhaps some of the finest pieces of characterization in her subsequent plays were derived from those days in the debtors’ gaol. She was soon a favourite with the prisoners. When at length the debt was discharged, and she was about to leave, many of the poor wretches crowded round her, saying that they hoped fervently she would be quick to incur more debts and come back to them. . . .

How and by whom the amount was paid we do not know. It is possible that friends may have bullied the Crown into settling its obligations—perhaps Butler may have repented his brutality. Aphra emerged gay, unruffled. She now devoted herself to the hard profession of writing for a living.

A bold thing for a woman of that time! Imagine a young lady of twenty-seven in the early days of Queen Victoria’s reign, announcing that she intended to wear breeches in the street, smoke cigars, and demand a vote! Mrs. Behn’s action aroused even more amazement—more indignation. But even as late as the nineteenth century, women hid their identity under masculine names. We remember “George Eliot,” “George Sand,” “Currer Bell.” It was not the act of writing that was held discreditable—it was the act of writing

for money that seemed the abomination and the scandal !

However, the mass of people was tolerant enough. From her own profession came the blows—the stings—the stabs. The authors, hating every sort of rival, but reserving special hatred for a woman rival, now put forth every trick that ingenuity could devise or spite suggest, to damage her rising fame. Aphra must have had a pretty bad time in those early days, with nothing but a pen between herself and a second sojourn in a debtors' prison, but she fought a good fight and kept the faith as she knew it.

That faith is crystallized in her plays and in certain of her novels. She believed in the eternal sinfulness of men and women—a sinfulness leavened by good-nature and tolerance. Her theory was that every sinner is tolerant because he is too lazy to be bigoted. She was no idealist—no mystic. The Restoration colours were for her, and she wore them in their gaudiest trim.

In all the writings of Aphra Behn we see the woman who sympathizes with what are called the “pleasant sins.” Not for an instant does the thud of the moralist's bludgeon—the crack of the satirist's whip—come to our ears. There was nothing of Juvenal—of Lucian—of Voltaire—of Zola—in Mrs. Behn. But she was an honest, full-blooded sinner in her writings and in her own way of life. For lascivious, exotic, unnatural tricks she had no taste—a coarse animalism brightened by a certain wit—that was her supreme aim.

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Of the long procession of lovers that paraded through her life we have no definite record, but here and there,



the name of one of these men stands out with a certain disagreeable prominence. For instance, there was Hoyle, a barrister of the Inner Temple, and no credit to that place if we may believe the records of this gentleman's behaviour. Hoyle was hardly the perfect lover. Indeed, all the passion appears to have been on the side of Aphra. Moreover, Hoyle was apparently mean and parasitic. That he sponged upon the generous, impulsive woman we may feel tolerably sure. She was as ready with her guineas as with her kisses.

To this Hoyle she wrote many absurdly passionate letters. It is painful to contemplate a woman of such brilliant talents wasting her time and her love on this loafer of the Courts—painful to read letters wherein she humbled herself and flung herself upon his mercy. Her last letter, written after he had deserted her, contains this passage :

“ . . . You left me to torments—you went to love alone and left me to rage and fevers. Farewell ! I love you more and more, every hour of my life. Know it, and Good Night ! ”

Hoyle and Aphra did not meet again. Soon after the termination of the liaison, the man was indicted at the Old Bailey on a charge of unnatural vice. He died a few years later from a wound given in a tavern quarrel.

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Success came to Mrs. Aphra Behn. She became something of a personage in the town—was invited to many important houses. After a time, certain of the more tolerant scribes began to acknowledge that a woman writer might be permitted to live and even to prosper ;



but the minor scribes—the envious little toads of the grubbiest of Grub Streets—would not leave her in peace. They ridiculed her in “squibs”—they invented malicious libels—they employed every method known to their pestiferous little brains to drive her out of their preserves.

On the other hand, she, of course, had her supporters who went, perhaps, to foolish extremes. They called her “The Incomparable Astrea”—spoke of her as a divinely inspired person. The opposing faction hinted at her many “liaisons”—and said that she was a thief who stole her plots, forgetting that Shakespeare, Marlowe and the Greek tragedians were thieves of similar habits. This faction held that she was a worthless writer, whose work would not have been tolerated for a day but for its attractive pornography.

Aphra was rarely endowed with what is called “luck”—a tremendous worker, a woman who could sway people by charm and tact, she nevertheless was pursued through life by a certain freakishness of fortune that her talent and her charm could not vanquish. Her first play, *The Forced Marriage*—quite an excellent piece of work—was ruined by the breakdown of one of the players. That player was Otway, who subsequently gave up the stage and took to writing poetry—gaining as a poet a position which one imagines he would never have secured as an actor. Otway on the first night, at the Duke’s Theatre, had a bad attack of what modern players call “first-nightis.” He forgot his lines, broke down, and came near to ruining the scenes in which he appeared.

The failure of *The Forced Marriage* was a terrible blow to Mrs. Behn. She had put her best work into the play—had believed that it would thrust her in one night to a place of safety from money cares. For it was always

money that was her objective—for fame she did not care very much. It is possible that if her lovers had been more generous, her output would have been considerably less. But she was forced to go on writing—she turned towards her task with industry. But the enthusiasm of the early days had gone—we imagine that it must have been hard, grinding toil.

Her subsequent plays fared more happily. *The Town Fop*, *The Feigned Courtesans*, *The Lucky Chance* : these and many others gained for her not only considerable money, but a large share of fame. But the evil fortune of which we have spoken could not leave her alone. In 1682, when she was doing well with the plays, she was forced to abandon playwriting. She had given offence in political quarters by certain references. She was threatened with imprisonment. Aphra, tired, overworked, dispirited, was so much overcome by the threat that she put aside her pen and vowed she would write no more plays. She had a fine spirit—she was a good fighter—but the life she had lived, packed with work and erotic experiences, was telling on her and her forces were breaking down.

However, the resolve to abandon playwriting did not endure, and in the years that followed Aphra, after a certain interval wherein she produced novels and verses, turned again towards the theatre. In 1686 *The Lucky Chance* was produced at the Duke's Theatre. It is, perhaps, the most indecorous (a mild word) of all her plays. It was very brutally criticized. Aphra showed her usual resentment. "It is only because I am a woman that all this scum is poured on me," she is reported to have said. "If a man had written this play, all would have been well. . . ."

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She was always in money difficulties, although she must have earned large sums. Whenever she writes to booksellers or other buyers of her wares, she shows the timidity that marks the petitioner who dare not ask for much for fear of being refused anything! In our own day, a writer who had secured the position of Mrs. Behn would have been sheltered behind powerful literary agents, who would have made short work of niggling publishers. But poor Aphra, fighting her own hard battle, had to chaffer and compromise. We find her writing to the booksellers concerning a volume of poems. She asks humbly that she may receive £30—"at least, they would be worth £25," she adds piteously. The pavements of Grub Street were hard places for men—for a woman writer who was breaking through a convention, those pavements must have been especially unkind.

Her output was enormous. In eighteen years she wrote nineteen plays, thirteen novels, a number of translations and many poems. She wrote, also, two long series of letters—*Love Letters of a Gentleman*, and *Love Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister*. In these letters there is nothing of the obscenity that is present in the plays. They are sentimental things—they belong rather to the early nineteenth century—George Sand, Lamartine, than to the full-blooded time of Charles II.

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It was hardly probable that a woman of the sort of Aphra Behn could look forward with any kind of confidence to a long life. Even had she regulated her days and nights with more propriety, the excitability that flamed in her would have consumed her body long before



late middle-age. She could not rest. If she was not making love, she was writing—if she was not writing, she was making love. We think of George Sand with her fingers stained with ink, pressing them round the neck of Alfred de Musset, until the poet declared that people accused him of not washing that neck! Aphra must have behaved in like manner. Life for her held two things only—men and pens!

Soon after forty, she found her health failing, and a very severe disease took hold of her. She was advised to take a long rest, but the advisers were not able to supply the means of the holiday. And so she went on writing, sometimes having to throw down her pen because the agony of the internal seizure caused her to writhe with pain. The instant the spasm passed, she would go on writing, and, caught up in the ecstasy of creation, would forget that she had suffered. She HAD to write, or she had to starve. From the men whom she had loved and who had loved her, she received no assistance. A lonely figure—brave and pathetic—that is how Aphra seems to us, and even the harshest moralist must soften his criticism when he contemplates this brave little woman, fighting for sustenance almost to the last hour of life.

The disease developed. There came at length the time when she had to put aside her writing, and lie for many days, hardly moving—speaking. When she spoke, she was very calm, and very resigned. She said that she had had a happy life, and had received all that she had merited. She spoke sometimes of the men who had abused her for having the temerity to write, and said that there would come a time when women writers would receive as much applause—as much admiration as men. She

died on the 16th April, 1689, having lived forty-eight years.

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Modern critics have said of Aphra Behn that here was a woman who wasted her talent. When on rare occasions she wrote of the things she knew—which she had experienced—she wrote with a touch of genius. Had she abandoned her dreary Eastern fictions and her romantic wanderings in “cloud-capped palaces”—and concentrated on the London that she knew, with its fishwives, its bullies, its parasites, its midwives, its lodging-house drabs, and all the others of the London picture, then she might have achieved a very considerable height. Whenever in the plays she deals with these types, she sends out flashes of the true light. But she had “Oroonoko,” her “Royal Slave,” in her blood—and ever afterwards, there was the “Oroonoko” glamour over all things.

Her imagination was not profound. It skimmed the surface. She could not penetrate the skins of her characters. She could describe a pimple with unction and with humour—but when she came to a heart-beat, she was merely conventional and sentimental. Nevertheless, her stories and her plays *move*. There is that in them whereof good novels and good plays are wrought.

Her songs and poems suffer, likewise, from this weakness of superficiality. They are pretty, smooth, sometimes passionate, but everlastingly on the surface. Scarce one line will bear the test of time. Even the most assiduous student of Restoration literature will call to mind only one phrase—“Love in fantastic triumph sat. . . .” But the mere fact that she wrote few lines that stand out

would not, of necessity, condemn her as a poet. The real condemnation lies in her complete inability to visualize anything but superficial values.

She probably knew her limitations. Aphra, good-natured, unpretentious creature, had no illusions concerning her work. "I write because I must," is what she might have said (and probably did say over and over again). Writing thus, she has left us much that will be forgotten—much that must be forgiven—and more than a little that will endure as sound work, characteristic of its age, and at least true to itself!







JOHN WILMOT, 2ND EARL OF ROCHESTER

# John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester

(1647—1680)

**T**HERE are certain men in whom the spirit of adventure functions only to a certain point.

These are the commonplace persons who eat a little, drink a little, play a little, love a little, and eventually die without having formed any definite idea as to whether or not the business of living was worth while. Beyond that point, men become soldiers, sailors, explorers. Behind that point, they may dwindle into thieves, tramps, rakes.

John Wilmot, the second Earl of Rochester, belonged to this class whose spirit of adventure advances a small distance, and then recedes, sometimes afraid to go back, sometimes to go forward. That he was capable of remarkable courage on occasions, we are aware—for he distinguished himself in more than one battle. But the essence of the man's character was the half-way spirit.

He was born, this poet and love-maker, at Ditchley, near Woodstock, in April 1647. His father, Henry Earl of Rochester (more frequently called Lord Wilmot) was an inconspicuous person. His mother was a very beautiful woman, and it is said that her son wrote his first lyric in praise of her loveliness. It was doubtless destroyed, as we find no record of the lyric in his published works.

This man, who formed the subject of many sermons on sin, behaved at school after the fashion of what is called the model child. He was looked upon by his teachers as a promising scholar. He gave no trouble, played no childish pranks. He reserved these for the years that were to come.

Men went to Oxford in those days when they were



yet children. Rochester entered Wadham College at the age of thirteen, and one year later was a Master of Arts. The requirements for that degree were not as exacting as they are to-day. A certain classicism was needed : that was all. A youth unable to do a simple addition sum—ignorant of the relative positions of India and Europe—might easily, if sufficiently immersed in cleansing classic waters, come forth clean for his degree. Rochester read the Greek and Latin amorists with delight. Ovid, we are told, was his favourite of them all.

This precocious boy left Oxford to go straight to the Court of Whitehall. Here he frequently drank too much, and like Marc Antony, " revelled late o' nights." He was immediately smiled upon by Charles, who perceived in him an affinity and a companion.

Rochester began to write verses. His first verses took the form of " squibs," or " libels "—humorous, coarse, or witty attacks on personages of the time. Sometimes, all these qualities were combined—frequently only the coarseness figured. The modern reader, accustomed to the good-natured cartoons of Mr. David Low or the gentle humours of *Punch*, can form only a meagre conception of the brutal scurrilousness—the deliberate filth—that formed the basis of political and social satires in every century until the nineteenth. The most cruel personalities—the most obscene innuendoes, were looked upon as an essential part of the fun. Rochester immediately displayed a decided gift for this class of work.

Possibly his head was turned by the excitement of the Court life. He was young for such a life : not many boys at seventeen find themselves in such an entourage of the kind with a King fawning on them and many lovely ladies ready to smile. Rochester began his career as a rake,

when he was little more than fifteen years old—and he went on with it until disease forced him to stop.

There is no doubt that the boyish roguishness of Rochester's character amused Charles very greatly. Rochester took many liberties with Charles—liberties which the King resented only in a half-hearted way. Men with enormous power over life and death must sometimes welcome mild affronts, because they can then pride themselves on a magnanimity that spares the offender. It is true that when Rochester went too far—when in "squib" or "lampoon" he castigated Charles too blatantly—the King would occasionally send him into a short exile. However, Rochester invariably returned when he imagined that the annoyance had been forgotten—and Charles was too good-natured to send him back.

Perhaps one of the unkindest quips concerning the King was the verse known to many persons who are ignorant of all else that Rochester wrote. The lines run thus (in the form of an imaginary epitaph for Charles) :

" Here lies a mighty monarch whose promise none relies on—  
Who never said a foolish thing and never did a wise one."

Charles took this comment with good humour. " That is easily explained," he said. " My words are my own, whereas my actions are those of my ministers."

Rochester at an age when a man is highly impressionable was brought under the influence of a set of literary rakes as choice as one could find in any Court in Europe. Amorous intrigue was the business of their lives—versification was a side issue. There was Sir Charles Sedley ; there was the Earl of Roscommon, who in certain moods wrote religious poems ; there was Sydney Godolphin ; there was Sir William Davenant and George Villiers,



Duke of Buckingham, Rochester's dearest friend, who wrote some admirable lines when not engaged in the more serious pastime of writing love letters. There was Sir George Etherege, who had given up the Law for dalliance with verse, and there was William Wycherley, who has sometimes been called by superficial critics the coarsest of the Restoration dramatists.

Let us remember these facts when we think of Rochester. Let us remember, moreover, that he died young, and was, perhaps, never so much a hardened man of the world as a light-hearted, light-footed boy. Only in his last years when stricken by disease, did he realize something of the spiritual significance of life. If we imagine him as a deliberate and brutal seducer of the Francis Charteris kind, we shall do him an injustice.

A great deal has been made by certain severe biographers of his attempt to carry off by a trick Miss Temple, one of the most attractive of the maids-of-honour at the Court. This girl escaped him by a chance which she may or may not have held fortunate—it is difficult to know what a woman really thinks of adventures of this kind when a man of Rochester's fascinations is concerned. It is possible that he planned this affair light-heartedly enough—but the King resented the insult to a member of his wife's entourage. Once again Rochester went into brief exile. When, at length, he returned to London, he lived in an obscure lodging. He did not inform the King of his whereabouts, but artfully arranged that certain friends should supply the information, so that Charles might send for him when the moment for pardon arrived.

During this absence from Court, Rochester amused himself by assuming disguises and strolling about London in search of adventure. He loved what children call



“dressing-up.” He would have been happy, one thinks, as an actor—the life of the mummer with its conscienceless and facile manners would have suited him well. He would disguise himself sometimes as a fish porter—sometimes as a beggar and actually would solicit alms—sometimes as a tavern loafer, when he would buy drinks for everybody in the tavern and recite lewd verses of his own composition. Always the zest of life bubbled in him—he could not remain quiescent.

At length he began to grow a little weary of this Alsatian way of life. He decided to dabble in a respectability of which he was ignorant—the respectability of the City merchant. Often had he mocked at these excellent burgesses—it seemed to him now that it would be excellent fun to get into their skin—ascertain exactly how the life sat upon them. He assumed a new name and a new disguise. So admirably did Rochester play his new part that he imposed himself as the genuine article on a number of prosperous and dignified aldermen, who invited him to their homes, and introduced him to their wives and daughters as a man of substance and a model citizen.

Rochester, at once yielding to the atmosphere of bourgeois life, now sustained his part by railing at the vices of the Court. He derived rich enjoyment from denouncing his own friends in exaggerated terms, and was especially hard on that “Rogue and libertine, the Earl of Rochester.” In fact, he overplayed his part of denouncer so wholeheartedly that one alderman actually remonstrated with him, pointing out that perhaps “Rochester” was not as black as he was painted. “O, but he is,” cried the Earl. “I swear that no negro under Heaven wears so black a heart!”

However, if Rochester were a “*censor morum*” on the

surface, he recompensed himself by certain diversions under the rose. Once, when driving home from a City banquet with an alderman and his young wife, the Earl made violent love to the lady whilst the husband snored in an opposite corner of the coach. When the alderman woke suddenly, he saw his wife in the arms of Rochester. The Earl, not at all disturbed, coolly ordered the alderman to stop the coach and get a restorative for the lady, who had (he said) fainted a moment before. On another occasion, he made love to three sisters in the same house simultaneously—on the plea that he was asking each one to aid him in his suit with the others.

The superficial moralist who in all this sees nothing but sensuality shows a foolish misunderstanding of a certain aspect of the rake's mentality. It is quite probable that Rochester on these occasions was far more concerned with the ingenuity of his actions and the grotesqueness of the situations than with any emotions of a sexual kind. Let us admit that Rochester was a sinner of a brand of scarlet that would have tempted preachers of all ages to choose him as a "terrible example"—but let us remember that he was never the morbid-minded sensualist. Rather was he the blithe Mercutio, laughing at himself, as ready to jest about a defeat as to boast about a conquest!

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It was impossible, of course, for Rochester to remain content for any length of time with the dull life of a City merchant. Very soon he looked out for a new impersonation that would bring him into contact with a more varied society.

London at that time was overrun by quacks, charlatans,



wonder-workers, elixir-of-youth vendors, beauty doctors, astrologers, and by all sorts and conditions of impostors, ready to cure corns or to convert base metals into gold. Rochester decided to join this enterprising band for a time. To that end, he took a house in Tower Street, assumed an elaborate disguise, with a portentous white beard and Orientally darkened skin. He called himself "Alexander Bendo"—and advertised himself as being possessed of true esoteric knowledge, "far above the bastard race of Quacks and Cheats." He posed as a physician with a cure for every ailment. To this profession he added the arts of astrologer and crystal-gazer.

He made a success of his new freak. His intuitive gifts provided him with ready predictions for the foolish clients (mostly women) who came to Tower Street. When he was bored, he would amuse himself by prescribing horrible concoctions for those unfortunate persons who came to him as ordinary patients. He would force them to drink the potions in his presence, and derive immense amusement from their gyrations. Not a very admirable behaviour this, but after all, it was the mischievousness of the schoolboy rather than the harsh malevolence of the hater of humanity (as some have called Rochester) that prompted the absurd antics.

Many women of high rank came to him—among them certain ladies from the Court whom Rochester knew quite intimately. By revealing to them certain secrets which they had related to him, he gained a huge reputation as a diviner and a magician. They went back to Whitehall and said that the true magic-worker had at last arrived.

However, this kind of diversion, although it vastly delighted Rochester for a time, began to pall upon him when the novelty ended. Moreover, it was necessary



that he should cease playing the fool (for a time at least), in order that he might set his financial affairs on a sound basis. He had exhausted his fortune, and the Tower Street venture had not proved remunerative from a money standpoint although it had remunerated him in diversion. Rochester now seriously gave himself to the consideration of marriage.

With his customary promptness, he decided that Elizabeth Mallett, the daughter of a rich Somersetshire squire, would suit him admirably, for the girl was beautiful enough to have proved satisfactory without money and rich enough to have proved satisfactory without beauty. Everything promised well for the success of Rochester's wooing with the exception of one thing—and that was Elizabeth herself. She promptly told the disgusted Rochester that no power on earth would make her marry him.

Rochester went straight to the King and asked him to use his influence. Charles, perhaps thinking that Rochester married would be Rochester marred, refused to interfere. It is possible that here some feeling of jealousy was involved. Charles, as we know, was genuinely fond of the wild and winning Rochester. He did not want to lose him.

The Earl was discouraged, but by no means beaten. He was unused to rebuffs—this rebuff stiffened his resolve. He decided to secure Elizabeth by means of what our modern phrase-makers would call "direct action." And so it came about that one evening in May, whilst Miss Mallett was driving home from a supper-party with an aged relative, her coach was surrounded by armed horsemen and footmen, who seized the girl and conveyed her to another carriage where a female escort had been

thoughtfully provided by Rochester. The carriage then drove away swiftly towards Uxbridge.

Elizabeth's venerable relative evidently was a person of some acuteness. Instantly he suspected that Rochester had arranged this expedition, and he ordered the coachman to drive to Whitehall. Charles was furious when he heard the story of his protégé's elopement. He said that he had been too indulgent—that the rogue had taken advantage of his many pardons. Soldiers were immediately commanded to follow the pursuit and bring back the Earl and his companion, the abducted young woman.

The business failed almost at its outset, for the carriage was overtaken and captured at Uxbridge. Miss Mallett went home, and Rochester was placed under arrest. Next morning, Charles, having denounced the Earl as a villain, a thief, a person incapable of gratitude, ordered him into imprisonment at the Tower. Here, at no great distance from the street where he had practised as Dr. Alexander Bendo, Rochester spent a short time—the imprisonment was a mild affair—with none of the rigours of political immurement. Charles speedily repented of his summary action, and Rochester was released, returning to the King's good graces with his usual facile agility.

Now it is possible that Rochester's daring attempt to steal a bride had stirred some latent sense of adventure—adventure on a higher scale than the mere painting of his face and masquerading as quack or alderman. For we find the Earl turning towards warfare. Van Tromp having been defeated by the Duke of York, Lord Sandwich took charge of an expedition against the Dutch. Rochester, though innocent as a mouse of naval fighting, was given a commission on the *Revenge*. At the battle of Bergen



he distinguished himself very gallantly and earned a reputation as a first-class fighting man.

His next appearance was in the army, but soon he went back to the sea, and again performed some valiant feats. He volunteered for a very dangerous undertaking and carried it off triumphantly. However, with the usual incontinence which coloured his actions, he soon tired of fighting and came back to the Court of Whitehall.

Miss Mallett had now come to the conclusion that Rochester might prove a more desirable husband than she had imagined. Influenced, perhaps, by his naval record, and, perhaps, liking him none the less for his attempt to abduct her, the lady became his wife. Of this marriage there were four children, three daughters and a son who died in infancy.

It has been said that the married rake frequently is a good husband. Like most paradoxes, this paradox sounds plausible, but holds small truth. The popular mind clings to paradox as the American nation clings to a new religion. Experience, however, shows us that the rake is rarely reformed by marriage. The union of Rochester and Elizabeth Mallett was, of course, unhappy for them both; it was impossible for him to be faithful to one woman. But he always spoke of her with affection—said that she was far too good for him. She never reproached him—accepted his vagaries with resignation and found solace in her children.

The physical courage of Rochester has been questioned. Certain critics have suggested that his pluck began and ended with his experiences at sea—that in the matter of private quarrels, he was always more ready to compromise than to fight. It is probable that the truth concerning this matter was this—that Rochester was a man of many



moods. Given a certain amorous adventure, the pursuit of a new love—and his gross clinging to life in order that he might enjoy the pleasures of the sense would then, perhaps, cause him to show the white feather. But when he was away from women—set down in the midst of war—he was able to show a certain carelessness of safety which was to his enduring credit.

It is probable, moreover, that his reputation for the "safety first" method was partly due to the action of the Earl of Mulgrave. Rochester had annoyed the Earl by a stinging "squib"—a challenge followed. However, when the parties arrived at the meeting-place, Rochester proposed fighting on horseback, on the plea that a certain malady prevented him fighting on foot. To this suggestion Mulgrave demurred, and after much argument and many harsh recriminations on both sides, the duel was abandoned. Mulgrave instantly seized upon the episode as an opportunity to blacken the character of his satirizer. He wrote a diabolically spiteful set of verses, wherein after castigating certain other persons, he went on to write :

" Last enter R———r of sprightly wit—  
Yet not for converse safe or business fit.  
Mean in each action, lewd in every limb,  
Manners themselves are mischievous in him."

The attack ends with these lines :

" A life so infamous is better quitting,  
Spent in injuring and low submitting ! "

The attack was primarily attributed to Dryden, but that Mulgrave was the author has been clearly proved.

The Dryden theory arose thus. In the beginning, Dryden, seeking the patronage that poets required in those

days, secured the patronage of Rochester, who generously admired his work. Eventually, he used his influence to obtain for the poet the Laureateship. However, at a later time, Rochester, with the jealousy of a weak man who repents a kindness, began to envy the man whom he had advanced. He lost no opportunity of trying to weaken his position. Eventually, he hired ruffians to waylay Dryden and attack him so fiercely that he nearly died. The attack was never officially brought home to the Earl, but there is little doubt that if he did not actually plan the details of the outrage, he took more than an academic interest in the affair.

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In spite of the many gross acts of libertinage performed by Rochester, he rarely encountered tragic episodes. In this respect he was far more lucky than many rakes of his time. One incident, however, had a terrible sequel.

Whilst posing as the keeper of a low tavern in company with his friend, the Duke of Buckingham, Rochester had fallen in love with the young wife of a man who sometimes came to the inn. Having made this man very drunk, the Earl put on feminine clothes, and went round to his house, where he pretended to faint on the doorstep. On being carried into the place and restored from his apparent comatose state, he immediately tore off his disguise, and made violent love to the astounded woman. So well did Rochester plead his cause that she invited him to remain, and they revelled together, quite indifferent to the fact that the husband was probably lying helplessly intoxicated in some adjacent ditch. Next morning the wretched man discovered what had passed in the night,



and immediately hanged himself ! Rochester, as usual, escaped without any unpleasantness.

For diplomatic reasons he steered clear of the King's established favourites. There is no record of Lady Castlemaine, of the Duchess of Richmond, having yielded to his attractions, but it has been suggested by one writer that Nell Gwynn was for a time something more than an acquaintance. All this, of course, is mere gossip. What is probable, however, is that many of the more obscure favourites may have smiled on Rochester. The amours of Charles were certainly not confined to the historical amours. . . . There was a region in the palace at Whitehall called the Back Stairs—a region guarded by a loyal and diplomatic servant. To those remote region stairs came many young women—seamstresses, milliners, the daughters of small tradesmen. Like the chorus girl who believes that some day she may become what is called a “star”—so may many of these girls have believed that the dignity of a Castlemaine, or a Richmond, might in the fullness of time attach itself to their charms.

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Love-making, verse-making, and racing were the principal diversions of the Earl of Rochester. He owned a number of horses, and frequently went to Newmarket with the King. But even when engaged in this exciting sport, he could not refrain from irresponsible tricks. On one occasion, when Charles was at Newmarket, disguised as a farmer, Rochester, who prided himself on his light fingers (he sometimes boasted that he would have made a good living as a pickpocket !), robbed the King of his purse and watch. Charles was staying at a small



inn where, of course, his identity was unknown. On the score being brought him, the emptiness of his wallet at once became evident. The innkeeper, fancying that his somewhat disreputable-looking guest was trying to bluff him into letting him leave with the bill unpaid, flew into a rage and threatened grievous penalties. Eventually Charles sent for some of his people and explained the situation. The tavern-keeper grovelled suitably, and Rochester, roaring with laughter, handed back to the King his purse and his watch. Charles was furious, and once again the Earl vanished from Court for a short time.

That Rochester was a tremendous drinker is a point that need not be emphasized when we are dealing with a time when heavy drinking was a mark of the elect of the earth. He tells us himself that for five years his life was a mass of very hazy happenings, because he was more or less drunk throughout that period. Lords and Commons were united on the point of fuddlement, although they might disagree concerning every other matter on earth. But the aristocrats probably exceeded the plebeians. The phrase "as drunk as a lord" speaks for itself!

Rochester, nevertheless, had his hours of quietude and even of respectability. In his country houses in Oxfordshire, whither he sometimes went after prolonged debauches, he spent his days in Arcadian fashion, writing verses, enjoying long walks, and tending his health with many hypochondriacal devices. His health was naturally enfeebled, and he devoted hours to the study of drugs and aphrodisiacs.

Before he had reached the age of thirty, this phantasmagoric liver had begun to decay very palpably. He was now in great fear of death. The man who lives exclusively through the sense clings to the envelope of

the flesh as the lover of the well-worn suit of clothes, the softly comfortable old shoes, clings to these wrappings of a sheltered condition. He dreads to fling them off, fears horribly the coming of the newer and stiffer coverings.

Rochester in his evil hour turned his thoughts towards religious things. He spent many hours with Gilbert Burnet, the famous Bishop of Salisbury. He spoke frequently of his remorse. However, when his health improved even in the smallest degree, he threw aside his specious repentances. During the last two years of his life he seems to have lived on a sort of emotional see-saw. When the apparatus was up, he was his old scoffing self; when it was down, he was humble, repentant, obsessed with self-reproach and self-hatred.

Gradually he became something of a chronic invalid, very feeble, very unhappy. He worked little—he walked little—but talked incessantly concerning his wretched condition of mind and body. In a volume called *The Last Days of the Earl of Rochester*, Burnet has described the life of the Earl during that period. A certain doubt has been thrown upon some of the good Bishop's statements, and indeed it is more than possible that Burnet exaggerated many things. The clerical writer, dealing with a case of this kind, is rarely consumed with a love of accuracy. Give him what is called a "terrible example" and he will not lose an opportunity of emphasizing the colours on his canvas.

In the summer of 1680 Rochester had a sudden lapse into something that resembled his former health. He was so innocently pleased by what he fancied might be a chronic return to strength that he did rash things, and one of these things brought on a serious inflammation.



Here is his comment on the episode in a letter to his friend Savile :

“ . . . it is a miraculous thing when a man who is half in the grave cannot leave off playing the fool and the buffoon, but so it falls out in my comfort. This moment indeed I am in a damned relapse brought about by a fever . . . and some low diseases more have deprived me even of the power of crawling. Now I fear that I must fall. . . .”

Death now staring at him at close quarters, Rochester sent for the Bishop, and kept him at his house, talking, talking, talking, day and night. These strangely assorted friends discussed all sorts and conditions of problems of life and death—of the world and the world that might come afterwards. Even at this point when he was collapsing physically, Rochester undoubtedly maintained a high level of intellect. He held his own with the Bishop, and frequently placed that wise theologian in a position which he found hard to defend. There must have been something in Rochester that went deeper than the level of the rake and the stringer together of waspish verse.

Exactly four weeks before his death, the Earl wrote to the Bishop the following letter :

“ WOODSTOCK PARK,  
OXFORDSHIRE.

MY MOST HONOURED DOCTOR BURNET,

My spirits and my body decay so equally together that I shall write you a letter as weak as I myself am in person. I begin to value Churchmen above all other men in the world. If God be pleased to spare me longer on this earth, I hope by your conversation to be exalted to



that degree of piety that the world may see how much I abhor what I so long loved. . . . Bestow your prayers upon me that God will spare me if it be His good will, so that I may show a true repentance, or, if the Lord pleaseth to put an end to my being now, that He will mercifully accept of my deathbed repentance and perform the promise that at whatsoever a time a sinner shall repent, He will surely receive him.

Put up this prayer, most dear Doctor, to God, for

Your Most obedient and languishing servant,  
ROCHESTER."

The end came soon after this letter had been dispatched. In answer to it, the faithful Burnet came to Woodstock, and spent several days with his penitent. He went away, leaving him in a state of calmness. On the 26th July, 1680, Rochester died, worn-out in body, but joyously expectant of salvation. Burnet, hearing of the death, said that he was certain that the soul of Rochester was safe.

The Earl died in a religious atmosphere, as we have seen, and the atmosphere must have thickened after his death, when the funeral sermon preached by the family chaplain, the Reverend Robert Parsons, ran into 14,000 words (about 50 pages of this book). The preacher took for his text the words "There is more joy in Heaven over one sinner that repenteth than ninety-nine just persons that need no repentance." Chaplains of those days were frequently of the nature of upper servants, who would come to heel on all occasions. Doing what was expected of him, the excellent Parsons skilfully glossed over the vices of Rochester and preached a homily that satisfied everybody.

Exactly as opinions have been divided concerning certain aspects of Rochester's character, so have opinions been divided regarding his work. There are some who hold that he was a third-rate poet—a man who wrote verses simply because it was the custom of the age. On the other hand, he has been called genius by those who use the word with the reserve that it demands.

As a satirist, he was undoubtedly excellent, if not supreme. His "Satire Against Mankind" is a triumph of airy pessimism. His "Familiar Letters" and "Political Satires" achieve and maintain a very high level. His tragedy, "Valentinian," is a mediocre work—he was a better writer of lyrics than of dramatic verse. Indeed the lyrics of Rochester are charged with a feeling and a passion rarely met; rare, if not entirely absent, from the lyrics of his contemporaries.

It is possible that Rochester did not take himself very seriously as a poet, though he probably was proud of his satires. One imagines that invariably his love affairs held the high place in his thoughts and in his sympathies; the verse-writing formed, perhaps, a sort of restful interlude, wherein he reviewed his experiences, basking in the warmth of the after-glow. But whether he took himself seriously or lightly, he is certainly distinguished from other poets of the Court by the fact that he did not flatter grossly, as those others flattered. We know that always he was more ready to castigate Charles than to praise him. A certain integrity of literary conscience must be conceded to this otherwise conscienceless sinner.

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Rochester was merely thirty-two when he died. Perhaps from his earliest years he had had a prevision of this

briefness of days. Is it not the shortness of life (even life at its fullest span) that forces the rake to a certain experiment with emotion? Does he not consciously or sub-consciously realize that the time for love-making and for eating and for drinking is very brief—that he must make the most of it? May he not read, with a significance unrealized by the Puritan, the words of Catullus :

“ Soles occidere et redire possunt.  
Nobis cum semel occedit brevis lux,  
Nox est perpetua una dormienda? ”

If a man lived for a thousand years instead of fifty or sixty, it is possible that he would sin less and pray more !



# Francis Charteris

1675-1732

THE Victorian novelist searching for a full-blooded villain, with a dark moustache, flashing teeth, six feet of well-proportioned bulk, and a highly sardonic manner would have rejoiced (academically if not personally) over the record of Francis Charteris. For he certainly fulfilled every requirement of that deliciously naughty species which to this hour stalks the stage of fourth-rate melodrama.

This intriguing person was the last male representative of a Scottish family. His grandfather, Sir John Charteris, had been a devoted follower of the tragic Montrose. The family, with the exception of this one very black sheep, appears to have been admirable in every way.

Charteris went through the usual educational routine, which in those days meant an inordinate cramming of Latin and Greek writers, to the exclusion of all other things. He is said to have shown a preference for Ovid and Catullus. It is possible that the amorous poets pleased him then as they pleased him at a later time, when he followed their precepts with an almost exaggerated diligence.

Before he was twenty, Francis became an ensign in a foot regiment in Belgium. Here he began to play cards and throw dice. His luck, aided by occasional and discreet cheating, was enormous. When he won from his brother officers all their money, he would return a portion of it to them as a loan at exorbitant interest. A Regent Street usurer of to-day would have been able to teach very little to Francis Charteris.

Now gambling was, of course, as much of an army man's life as his equipment, or his valour, and Marlborough,



FRANCIS CHARTERIS





no doubt, encouraged it. However, he did not approve of his regiments being turned into loan offices. We cannot learn how the Duke came to hear of the tricks of Charteris, but it is possible that some victim, having been remorselessly bled, whispered a hint to an aide-de-camp who in his turn informed his chief.

Francis was at once tried by court-martial, and after putting up an ingenious but feeble defence, was found guilty. Nor was he merely cashiered, for the Duke, anxious to furnish an example, ordered him to be drummed out of the regiment.

Only a soldier, perhaps, can appreciate what this means. The ordinary business man—the engineer, or the tailor—reads of the business, and remarks to his wife that, “After all, my dear, I see nothing very dreadful in it.” But the soldier, who has been accustomed to regard the drum as the very heart-beat of the army, finds it horrible to stand and listen whilst the muffled roar drives into him his disgrace and his ruin. Men who have accepted cashiering with apparent calmness have been known to shoot themselves before they would face this ordeal.

However, it says much for the thick skin of Charteris that he was not discouraged in the least. Evidently he was satisfied that he had made as much money as he could contrive out of his soldiering, and he was young enough to look forward rather than look back.

He returned to his home in Edinburgh. After staying there for some time and causing scandal by intrigues with servant maids, he had a sudden yearning once more for the army. He joined a marching regiment and went to Flanders. After a short time he was sent to England in order to raise recruits. On the way to this country he lost all his money at cards, but that incident did not at all

disturb him. He had various methods of making good his losses.

He took a large and expensive room at an excellent hotel—a place which had a reputation and which could not afford to play tricks with it. Charteris went to bed and slept soundly. In the morning the building was suddenly flung into excitement by a wild ringing of bells, by shouts and curses of rage. Servants rushing to the room from which the sounds had come were met by Charteris, who, red with rage, roared out that he had been robbed in the night of his breeches and his purse.

The landlord was, of course, horrified. Francis, refusing to be softened by the man's apologies, swore that he would denounce the house as a den of thieves. However, eventually he hinted that he would overlook the outrage if the landlord would make good his loss. A pair of breeches was found for him, and a considerable sum paid by the landlord to compensate for the contents of the missing purse. Charteris then haughtily said that he was satisfied, reserving to himself the fact that during the night he had burned his breeches and hidden the ashes in his travelling valise !

(A pretty mean sort of person, this Charteris, and the writer hesitated before placing him in companionship with generous sinners of the Rochester and Ovid type. But he deserves a place, perhaps, in this record, because his sins were unique in their cold-bloodedness and in their amazing area.)

Having secured his recruits Charteris returned to Flanders, but soon after that time he appears to have left the army, for we hear nothing further of his career during the next years, except that he was at home in



Edinburgh, living with his people. He now set himself to build up a fortune by gambling.

Never did a Rockefeller or a Carnegie set to work more vigorously on an industrial fabric than did Charteris work at his trade of gambling. He learned all the tricks of the trade and invented a few more! He brought swindling at card games and at dice, if not to a science, at least to a sort of art.

During this time he was going into what is called good society, where he carried on his cheating games. Once he contrived to win the sum of £3000 by means of a mirror. A certain Duchess whom he was playing was sitting with her back to the glass, and Charteris coolly inspected her cards. It was on that occasion that Francis made the sole pun that is recorded to his credit. For when, a little later, the Duchess said innocently: "Was that due to luck, Mr. Charteris?" he replied at once: "No, Your Grace, to reflection!"

However, Charteris did not invariably get off so easily. Although he showed huge dexterity with cards—a dexterity which a Mr. David Devant himself might have displayed—he was "caught out" more than once. Sometimes the results were unpleasant. One evening, for instance, whilst playing with a number of Club friends, he was suddenly discovered with an ace of hearts up one sleeve and an ace of diamonds up another. Charteris, not at all dismayed, laughed and said that he had been doing card tricks at home to amuse some young relatives, and the aces must have remained there by accident. The remaining cards on the table were at once counted, and, of course, his deceit was made clear.

The men decided that they would give him a lesson. At first a thrashing was suggested, but at length they



abandoned this proposal and contented themselves with stripping the cheat of all his clothing and standing him in a corner of the room, threatening him with severe corporal punishment if he tried to escape.

However, Charteris was ready for this kind of emergency, and very soon made himself so objectionable by means of certain grotesque and noisy actions that they huddled him into his clothes and dismissed him with a kick.

In spite of these and other disgraceful tricks, Charteris continued to enjoy the society of decent people. How can one explain this? The solution may, perhaps, be that the strict etiquette of gamblers' honour which was, perhaps, inaugurated by the public school system of a later age, did not prevail to the extent to which it extends to-day. Of course, men resented cheating, but, perhaps, were inclined to view it as a personal vexation rather than as a transgression of a rigid code. Only on this or some similar assumption can we attempt to explain the extraordinary tolerance shown by Society to this adventurous cheat. There is the possibility, moreover, that the considerable wealth of Charteris (for he had amassed a fortune by gambling) may have earned him a certain indulgence.

He had never squandered his winnings. Always he had invested them with the care and consideration of the cautious financier. These investments, together with fortunate speculations and occasional large money-lending transactions, had placed Charteris in a position when he might have lived honestly had he chosen.

He seems to have done this for a very short time. In 1702, having achieved a certain respectability (as Becky Sharp said, it is easy to be virtuous on £10,000 a year),

he married Helen Swinton, a daughter of Sir Alexander Swinton, a legal officer of the Crown. Growing tired of Edinburgh, and, perhaps, pining for a wider field of speculation in connection with his wealth, he decided to set up housekeeping in London. A little later we find him in an elaborate house in Poland Street, where he entertained all sorts and conditions of people, Nabobs, merchants, Jews—he was always careful to chose acquaintances who might prove remunerative.

Already his brief respectability was beginning to hang heavily upon Charteris, and the house in Poland Street was speedily the scene of specious gambling frauds. Contemporaneously with this lapse from grace, he seems to have had a desire to return to the army. He purchased a commission in a company of Foot Guards, and speedily discovered a new means of revenue, by means of huge sums which he extracted from men who wanted their discharges. He was accustomed to bully mercilessly the more wealthy soldiers, hoping that they would be induced by his brutality to abandon the army. Moreover, he was guilty of other malpractices, of a more subtle kind. Charteris seems to have been a man who simply could not play a straight game. One imagines that even if decent methods had brought him more gain than shady tricks, he would have preferred the less highly paid but, perhaps, more exciting ways of the crooked.

For some time his tricks went undetected. Men grumbled, swore, paid up and vanished with their discharges. At length, however, a fellow whom Charteris had taken into his confidence and who had assisted him in his swindling bargains, quarrelled with him rather seriously and revealed the business to the authorities.

Naturally an uproar followed. Francis Charteris was



arraigned at the bar of the House of Commons to answer for his malpractices. Once again this fortunate adventurer was in a very serious position, but he seems to have faced it with composure and assurance. His family got to work and used their influence on his behalf. In the result, he got off with a severe reprimand and an order to make a humble apology. He doubtless did this with his tongue very prominently advanced in his cheek. At the time, the question of dismissing him from the Service did not arise, but at a later stage he was cashiered, and thus underwent the humiliation of being kicked out twice within a few years !

One is left in a state of doubt as to how and where the man gained his title of "Colonel." It is hardly likely that it was a legitimate title, for although army methods are not usually distinguished by superabundant logic, nevertheless one rarely hears of a soldier gaining high promotion for tricks of the kind performed by Charteris. It is possible that he assumed the title on the same principle that hairdressers sometimes call themselves "Professors" ; he imagined that it would help him to secure a certain status that might otherwise have been lacking.

Of active service he saw nothing, except during the Rebellion of 1715, when he is said to have behaved bravely enough, probably because he could not help it. For Charteris was no hero. He never took a bodily risk when he could avoid it, unless urged on by animal passion. It is true that he took part in more than one duel, but the encounters were always more or less perfunctory things.

On one occasion, indeed, when meeting an adversary whose heroism was probably akin to his own, Charteris



arranged with his opponent that a few superficial scratches, if accompanied with great sword play, would impress the spectators and leave both of them unhurt. The duel came off—some tiny prickings followed—and honour was satisfied !

On the other hand, it must not be imagined that Francis was a complete coward. But the man who lives the sort of life enjoyed by Charteris usually protects himself from death as much as possible. His body being to him an exquisite delight, he is in no hurry to rob it of sensation. Charteris hated the word " death " more than any word in the dictionary. It was a word he rarely used, and if spoken in his company, provoked at once a violent sneer—or an irate insult. " Gentlemen do not discuss death," he is reported to have said ; " let us leave the topic to sextons and to parsons ! " The fact that a parson was sitting near him did not deter Charteris from this remark.

Obsessed by this fear of death, he took great care of his health and rarely drank too much. But in the direction of women, he abandoned all control and missed no opportunity of love-making.

Thus far we have spoken of Francis Charteris as a gambler and cheat. His exploits in that region were small, insignificant compared with his exploits in connection with women.

From the age of fourteen he had been a swift and unscrupulous seducer. At school he had made love to the girl servants. He was always something of an artist in his erotic adventures, and rarely associated with any woman by reason of a purely animal desire. No woman could appeal to Charteris unless she had a musical voice and a small hand. One wonders what he would

have said to the modern excrescence of horn-rimmed glasses !

At each of his houses (he had estates in Scotland and in England) several young women were from time to time entertained, but Charteris rarely proved a faithful lover. He loved variety for its own sake. Sometimes he would hover between his houses in the North and in the South, alternately making love to the different young women. In Lancashire, after a time, he became so notorious that people hissed and hooted him as he walked through the streets.

He entertained largely in order that he might win money from his guests. Those visitors, however, who held any kind of moral scruples must sometimes have found themselves in a highly embarrassing position. For, on going to their rooms at night, they would discover that their host had provided for them good-looking girl companions who, without waiting for the formality of being invited, were already lodged securely in the apartments. Charteris, with his usual avarice, actually went to the length of taxing any money gifts which his guests happened to bestow upon the young Cyprians.

Sometimes (though very, very rarely), the visitors were inclined to resent these hospitalities on the part of Francis, and it is said that one gentleman was so thoroughly scandalized and enraged that he left the house at once, and next morning challenged his host to a duel. Charteris declined to meet him on the ground that a man "who was afraid of a woman in bed would be more afraid of a man in the field !"

The word "orgy," so dear to the sensational writers for the Press, is, perhaps, the only word that may be applied to the disgraceful doings in the houses of Charteris.



Banquets at which all the guests wore practically no clothing were frequent. Sometimes he would have huge dishes brought upon the table which, on being opened, disclosed young women "in puris naturalibus." A somewhat worn-out "cliche" of pornographic sensationalism this; the Cæsars probably did the thing more graphically, and certainly more elaborately than Charteris or other debauchees of a later time. One wonders at the childishness of persons who, ostensibly hardened rakes, can be amused or gratified by such puerile exhibitions. One can only explain the phenomenon on the ground that these naked exhibitions usually appeared after dinner, when the wine had gone round the table more than once!

Charteris pursued his hunt for women everywhere; in the streets, parks, theatres, dancing-rooms, pleasure grounds of the old Vauxhall type. When he saw a girl who pleased him, he would send one of his people to find out concerning her—to buy her off-hand if she was ready to be bought—if not, to cajole her, and eventually bring the girl to his house, where Charteris speedily endeavoured to force his kisses on her.

Perhaps the sole virtue that can be attributed to this man is a negative virtue, for it was said of him that he hated any kind of perversion. He never drugged himself, and as we have already pointed out, rarely drank too much wine. He was a full-blooded Juan, and but for devious tricks with cards, and a certain mad unscrupulousness with women, might have come down to us as what is called a "fine old British sportsman!"

One of his escapades took the form of making love to the daughter of a country vicar with whom he was staying. The laws of hospitality rarely trouble a rake to any extent



—for Charteris they did not exist. After dining “en famille” with the clergyman—after sitting up till midnight with him over a bottle, whilst the minister discussed crops, tithes, and sermons, this gallant gentleman would steal up to the girl’s room and enjoy her society for the night. The affair went on for several nights. There came the night when the vicar, after a hint given him by a servant, came up to the room and thundered at the door. Charteris, cool, collected, resourceful, opened the window, flung out a mattress, and then hand-in-hand with his mistress, leaped to the garden.

The parson was, of course, horrified. He stormed, uttered many threats, but fearing a scandal, took no action. Charteris, with the luck of the libertine, again escaped with no greater penalty than a cold in the head.

Throughout the period of his amours, Charteris, whilst neglecting his wife, treated her with a certain kindness. Unlike some rakes of a more brutal type, he did not humiliate the poor woman by bringing his chance acquaintances to the house. He kept his legitimate and his illegitimate relations in watertight compartments. A house in Golden Square was reserved for these ladies, and sometimes as many as four or five were gathered together there at one time.

It must have been an enormous relief to Mrs. Charteris when her daughter married the Earl of Wemyss and she went to live with her in Scotland. After the marriage, we are told that Charteris and his wife met only at intervals. But he always spoke of her with kindness, saying that she had been far too good for him. . . . Frankness is sometimes the sole virtue of this class of rake.

After his wife’s departure, Francis, now a very rich

man, took a house in George Street, Hanover Square. He now employed special agents to watch the waggons bringing young women to London to enter domestic service. Some of these girls were engaged as servants at George Street, and so joined his informal harem.

Rumours now began to be circulated concerning the house. It was said that certain of the girls had been kept there against their will, and had been subjected to very disgraceful treatment. The mob, always glad to believe the worst (after the fashion of mobs in all ages and in all places), surrounded the building, pelted it with garbage, and smashed the windows. Charteris, of course, might have summoned the proper authorities to aid him, but his acute brain knew a better, a more convincing plan.

Whilst the shouting and the window smashing was at its height, Charteris suddenly appeared on a low balcony, leading a very attractive young woman. He raised his hand to gain a hearing, and when the people were comparatively quiet, he said that they had made a grievous mistake concerning him. "Here is one of my supposed victims," he announced. "She will tell you herself whether or not she is kept a prisoner!" The girl then smiled and in a clear tone that penetrated some distance said that she and her companions had been treated with kindness and that they remained in the house of their own free will. This "coup-de-théâtre" succeeded, and the crowd went away, some of them, with the invariable fickleness of mobs, actually raising a cheer for Charteris and his domestic staff.

Whenever a really bad scandal seemed on the point of swelling into a perilous situation, Charteris would silence the scandal-mongers by means of bribes. There



came at length the day when a rash and terrible episode brought him within reach of hanging !

A fact that is, perhaps, only known to lawyers is that the Statute Book of England still records death as the extreme penalty for the crime called rape. That penalty is never inflicted to-day, but there would be no actual power to prevent a judge from passing sentence of death if he chose. Charteris must have been aware of the penalty, which in his age was frequently exacted. However, overcome with a sudden passion, he risked death to gratify a moment's desire.

It happened that one evening, whilst walking on the outskirts of Edinburgh, he met a young woman to whom he made his usual overtures. When the terrified girl tried to walk away, he caught her in his arms, and presenting a pistol to her head, gave her the choice of death or surrender to his wishes. The girl, overcome with fright, gave in, and the scoundrel, having given her some money, which she flung into the road, returned to his house.

A warrant was immediately issued for his arrest. He had made no attempt to leave England, probably believing that the incident would "blow over," as many similar incidents had blown over in the past. Very soon, however, Charteris realized that he was in a most dangerous position. After several preliminary hearings, he was committed to stand his trial at the Assizes. The evidence against Charteris was so conclusive that the jury could not do otherwise than find him guilty. He was immediately sentenced to death.

What must have been his feelings at this moment ? It is possible that he was not overwhelmingly agitated. The rake is nearly always an optimist as regards his own



affairs—he has seen himself come through so many scrapes that he believes in his lucky star.

If Francis Charteris held this cheerful attitude towards his fate, it was more than justified by the circumstances that followed. For his friends and relatives immediately got to work and began to pull the necessary strings. The King was approached in person—for Charteris had several acquaintances who were in good odour at Court. Every possible excuse was put forward in favour of the condemned man. His good work during the Rebellion was recalled (and probably exaggerated). It was suggested, also, that he had committed the crime whilst under the influence of drink—that he had not realized his action. Had Charteris been a political offender—had he been a rebel instead of a queller of rebels—one imagines that he would have had small chance of forgiveness. But rape being in the view of Majesty a trivial crime compared with a political offence, he was eventually given an unconditional pardon. He was not even ordered to leave the country !

His health was now weakening to some extent. He had a fine constitution, but he had spent it with a reckless hand. He fell seriously ill, and during his illness was seized with sudden repentance.

He grew nervous about his spiritual welfare, and wearied his nurses by asking them how he might make reparation for his sins. He could not rest for thinking out schemes. At length, he sent for his architect and ordered him to draw up plans for a magnificent building to be erected at his expense. The building was to be a home and hospital for unwanted children. An unkind critic might have suggested that the home would probably be a family affair, in view of Charteris's past vagaries.

However, the building never received a single brick, for when he recovered, and the architect came blithely with his plans, his specifications and his estimates, Charteris incontinently tore up the papers and told the man that he had decided to abandon the project. The "devil" no longer "sick" had abandoned his saintship!

With the coming back of health, there returned the old desires, but the man was now so notorious a person that he found it difficult, at times, to secure new conquests. People shunned him in clubs—women fled as he came near. Charteris was fast developing into a sort of "bogey man"—a kind of miasma seemed to hang round him—it was said that highly sensitive people introduced to him for the first time, and knowing nothing of his character or his record, experienced a feeling of disgust and fear.

Sick and dispirited, he decided to leave England for a time. He went abroad, and roamed the Continent, frequenting low hotels and gambling-rooms, where he frequently won huge sums. His luck as a gambler aided by discreet cheating continued throughout his wanderings. His notoriety as the man who had escaped hanging by a fluke had preceded him, and in many far-off places people came from their houses to stare at him as a sort of curiosity. Charteris, who was very vain, was by no means vexed by these incidents.

Charteris was always ready to defend the rake and the rake's actions with a certain specious logic. On one occasion during his wanderings, he was staying at an hotel, where he met an English parson of the Puritanic type. These strangely-assorted mortals became rather friendly, the parson, perhaps, hoping (with glorious optimism) that he might make a convert. However, when he delicately



touched upon the subject of immorality, Charteris at once burst into a long tirade in defence of the professional libertine. "I will vow, sir," he said, "that we sinful people, as you describe us, have given more pleasure—more joy to women—than a thousand of you preaching mummies!" Discussing the subject with another man, Charteris pointed out that the rake who seduced a woman and abandoned her probably caused far less misery and suffering than the moral-minded man who married a woman and wore out her patience and her heart with narrow-minded petty grievances and a host of children!

It is more than possible that Francis believed these specious arguments, for a man of his type will always fit his conscience to his vagaries. But in spite of his apparent composure and self-satisfaction, his fibre was every month growing feebler, and suddenly he was seized with a desire to return to England. He hated the thought that he might die in a foreign country.

He went back to London, to the house in George Street. He was now nearly fifty-five, but although his physical powers had faded to an extent, his brain, dominated by old habit, tormented by a thousand memories, still turned itself in the direction of women. He could not rest unless some feminine companion were near. When he was alone he would divert himself with gowns that his mistresses had worn—stroking them, as though they still held the creatures whom he had loved. . . .

It would have been well for Charteris had he been content to solace himself with memories and had refrained from more active diversions. But it happened that, for a time, his health rallied—he regained something of the old fire. Once again obsessed by desires, he did a terrible thing.



Not to many men has it been given to be tried and sentenced to death for a serious crime, and at a later time to be tried again for a similar offence and once more sentenced. Charteris gained this distinction. It was the last lurid episode of a life crammed to bursting point.

A girl called Annie Bond had been brought to his house as a servant. Charteris having made a very serious attempt on the young woman, was enraged by his failure, and dismissed her from his house, swearing that she had stolen money.

At the trial which followed his arrest, the jury believed the story of the girl and refused to be influenced by the plea of Charteris that she had brought the charge to spite him for the dismissal. A man of his notorious reputation does not cut a good figure in the dock when faced with an indictment similar to one on which he has been previously condemned. Once again, sentence of death was pronounced on this extraordinary man. On the 26th February, 1730, Charteris left the dock at the Old Bailey believing that never again would he look upon the world of living men.

For his optimism had gone, and he was at last reduced to misery—to despair. Moreover, he was now very ill, and was kept in the prison hospital suffering from a chest complaint. Once again his friends came to his assistance, and his son-in-law, the Earl of Wemyss himself, drew up a petition for pardon. Amazing as the fact may seem, the authorities actually pardoned Charteris a second time. He was discharged from prison on the understanding that he would settle a handsome sum on his victim.

The end was now drawing near. Charteris came out of gaol a wreck. He walked like an old man—his eyes were faded—he shook and hesitated when he spoke. It was said of him that as he walked from the prison to the coach that was awaiting him, for the first time in his life he failed to look at the women who had assembled there.

He was too weak for sin. Broken and old before his time, after escaping from a mob that tried to kill him, he went to one of his houses in the country, where he tried to find solace in books and in writing letters wherein he exonerated his conduct. His memory was going—he could not even remember the name of his wife. How the moralists of the day must have wagged their heads and gloated over the spectacle of Francis Charteris in his last months !

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In the month of February, 1732, exactly two years after his second trial and condemnation, the worn-out sinner lay dying at Hornby Castle. Suddenly he was seized by a longing for his native Scotland, a latent patriotism rising in this last hour. He insisted on being taken to his house at Stoney Hill.

And now his wife and his daughter came to him and nursed him with care and kindness. Why do women love and forgive a rake ? Is it because the professional libertine never argues and rarely tries to prove himself in the right ? A woman will forgive a man for being in the wrong, but rarely for being in the right if she happens to disagree with him !

The Nemesis, dear to the theologians and the moralists, came now to Francis, for as he lay waiting for death, he



was tormented with fears of hell. He would wake during the night screaming that he was on fire—that he was being torn with demoniacal claws. He would refuse to go to sleep, fearing that he might not wake. .

He did strange things. He humbled himself to priests—entered into long theological discussions with holy men. Once he said quite seriously that he would give his entire fortune and all his houses to any person, priest or layman, who could prove that hell did not exist. The reward went unpaid.

This was the prelude ; yet when the end came it was peaceful enough, and Francis Charteris went out of the world as quietly as a man falls asleep. The self-satisfied, smug Chadbands of the time would have rejoiced to see a horrible finish, for a life such as this life had been, but let us thank whatever gods we acknowledge that nature is kinder than the theologians. She is usually ready with her anæsthetic when the time comes—and her anæsthesia of carbonic acid gas is as ready for the sinner as for the saint !

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The crowd behaved with the usual mass-stupidity and brutality at the funeral of Charteris. Refuse and stones were flung at the hearse—at the very graveside there was yelping and hooting. A crowd is always indignantly moral in bulk, though frequently the reverse in individual behaviour.

Charteris left a very huge estate, the bulk of which went to his grandson. To the Duke of Argyll he bequeathed his pistols—weapons that had taken part in many half-hearted duels—and his horses he left to Robert Walpole. No legacies went to women friends. It is



possible he had not kept a record even of his chief favourites.

After his death, poets of the time burst into the inevitable doggerel concerning Charteris. Had that gentleman been privileged to read the poems, he would probably have been more amused than vexed, for he had a certain thick sense of humour, with a skin that was yet thicker.

Charteris in these amateur verses was satirized, castigated, held up to horror. One ingenious poet composed an imaginary epitaph for his tomb. Here are the opening lines :

“ Here Continueth to Rot the Body of

FRANCIS CHARTERIS

Who with Inflexible Constancy  
And with Inimitable Uniformity of Life  
Persisted in spite of Age and Infirmary  
In the practice of Every Human Vice.”

This was hardly fair to Charteris, for quite a number of vices did not trouble him, but epitaphs, as we know, run to extremes. Moreover, there is the possibility that Charteris may not have been quite as evil as his biographers have suggested. It is said that Hogarth painted him as a figure in his “ Harlot’s Progress,” but the story has been frequently denied. Alexander Pope came down heavily on Francis, but Pope probably took the view of the invalid cheated out of many experiences. Some writers, indeed, have spoken kindly of Francis Charteris as a man of fine intellect, loyal, affectionate, but obsessed by a certain weakness. It is possible that the truth lies in the Aristotelian mean between these divergent opinions.

Has the rake his uses? Charteris himself (as we know) playfully or seriously suggested that the Libertine plays a very essential part in the scheme of things. A dangerous doctrine this, but it is imaginable that, here and there in his passage, he leaves a gleam that endures as an after-light. Cannot we picture some old woman, crouching over her fire, fifty years after the death of Francis Charteris—having forgotten his very name, yet thinking of the kiss that first woke her to reality?







GIACOMO CASANOVA DE SEINGALT

# Giacomo Casanova

(1725—1798)

CASANOVA has sometimes been called by those persons who love a cliché, "The Prince of Adventurers." But he was more, much more than that. Casanova was a King, a High Priest, a Field-Marshal, a Lord High Admiral of rascally adventuredom. He loved chicanery and imposture for their own sakes, apart from any rewards in money. His cynicism was diabolical—and in that cynicism towards life, men, women, religion, and the common morality of humanity, he symbolized his century—the most decadent and heartlessly brilliant since the days of the break-up of Roman independence. He symbolized, moreover, his birthplace—for Venice was called at that time the "Courtesan City" of the world.

Two strolling players were his parents, and he was born on the 2nd April, 1725. This man who strode vigorously through a long life packed with exhausting incidents that would have finished many men before forty, was, as a child, feeble to the point of invalidism. Frequently they thought that he would not live. His mother gave him much devotion. In her absence, during tours, he was watched over by his grandmother. For this relative Casanova preserved always a great affection—an affection which was merited, for it is possible that without her assistance history would have been robbed of the most extraordinary rogue that ever tripped gaily across her pages.

Casanova's health was suddenly restored by what was regarded as magic. For a certain famous witch happening to be in the city, the grandmother took the child to that



personage and begged her to bring about a cure. The witch was successful ! It is possible that she used legitimate remedies, cloaking them with spells. So efficient were her remedies that before he was fifteen Giacomo was ready for amorous adventure. He was now strong, active, intensely vital. He could not remain inactive for a moment.

The physical beauty of Casanova attracted the attention of the notorious Georgio Baffo—a young noble—who had made a certain name for himself by writing licentious verse. He insisted on sending the boy to Padua that he might be educated at the University, and to Padua Giacomo went gaily, scenting new adventures, if not new knowledge.

After a short and by no means distinguished career at Padua, he returned to Venice and studied Law, and once again he was lucky enough to gain a rich patron. M. Malipiero, a senator of some importance, was attracted exactly as Baffo had been attracted, by the “insouciant,” good-looking youth, who knew when to be humble and when to be insolent. Already, it will be apparent, Casanova was parasitic. He had no claim on Baffo—no claim on Malipiero—but he was more than ready to accept all that they would give him.

The Law proved too dry for this ardent spirit. He could not endure the prospect of spending his days amid parchment and quills. Suddenly, it occurred to this son of an actor and an actress that the Church would give him an opportunity for the display of his handsome person and of his emotional gifts. Moreover, it would bring him into contact with women.

Casanova became an Abbé when he was fifteen ! This



seems incredible to modern ears, but Church appointments were facile things in the eighteenth century in Venice. It must be remembered also that he was tall for his age, and probably looked considerably older than his fifteen years. Italian youth is frequently precocious. No surprise was roused by his appearance in the pulpit, where he preached more than one sermon that brought tears to the eyes of many women, and gained him several adventures of an erotic nature.

Adventurers and charlatans in all ages have loved to label themselves with alluring titles. Casanova now styled himself a "Doctor of Law"—though his claims to that dignity were probably as substantial as his claims to the priesthood. There are some who hold the opinion that he drifted into the easy life of the adventurer without thought or deliberation, but all the evidence seems to point to the probability that from his earliest years he had a tendency to exploit the weaknesses of his friends.

Nevertheless, clever, subtle, as Giacomo undoubtedly was, he could not bring himself to carry out any consistent scheme if a woman chanced to step between himself and its achievement. Utterly passionless, and entirely sensuous, he yet made a complete fool of himself. Here was Casanova making a satisfactory progress, aided by the powerful and good-natured Malipiero. With a little patience, a little self-control, he might have secured a very admirable position. But what happened? He took advantage of the temporary absence of his patron to make violent love to the favourite "*chère amie*" of that elderly sinner. One evening M. Malipiero returned home unexpectedly to Venice, and found the girl in the arms of Casanova. Immediately he gave the youth a very severe

beating and turned him out of the house. This was, perhaps, the first serious rebuff in the life of the young adventurer. It was the prelude to many, but he had a thick skin; the heaviest boot left only superficial bruise.

And now behold Casanova in that condition wherein every soldier of fortune finds himself at times—he was without a home and without money. In his emergency he acted with the characteristic egotism of the libertine. Ignoring the claims of his brothers and sisters, he sold his father's house and property and pocketed the proceeds. It is probable that his legal training helped him to carry out this fraud with a certain plausibility and immunity from any vexatious consequences, which he imagined would secure him from punishment. His optimism was not justified. For Rozetta, the famous lawyer, having been approached by the defrauded family, saw to it that Giacomo was promptly arrested and imprisoned. Casanova accepted his fate calmly enough. He was already planning vengeance. By means of a bribe to the gaoler, he escaped for a few hours, and having put on an elaborate disguise, went to Rozetta's house and beat him mercilessly. He then went back to the gaol in time to establish a sort of alibi and to save the reputation of the friendly gaoler.

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Venice was now becoming too dangerous a place for Casanova. Immediately after his release, he went off to Rome. En route there, he lost all his money in gambling. Indeed gambling always held the high place in his life



in conjunction with women. Sometimes he said that the dice and the cards were even more attractive than love affairs, because the variety was endless. There might be a certain monotony about the charms of an enchantress, but the fall of the cards and of the dice was eternally problematical.

Unable to travel as far as Rome, by reason of his penniless state, he went ashore at a tiny port—a dreary, poverty-stricken village. Here, hard-up, wet, half-starved, but believing always in his star—believing always that by some ingenious trick he would soon fall into soft places, he was by no means discouraged. Presently he encountered on the road a travelling beggar-friar—one of the insect-haunted, snivelling, mendicant theologians whom one met throughout Europe. In the company of this man, he walked to Rome.

In this city of churches and in this stronghold of religion, his thoughts again turned towards theological distinction. A letter from his mother reminded him that she had a very powerful friend in Calabria, the Bishop of Martirano. Rome not proving as responsive as he had hoped, he now resolved to go to Calabria and try his fortune with the Bishop, whom he pictured as an important personage with a wealthy entourage.

It must have been a sad, a terrible moment for Casanova when after a long and toilsome journey he arrived at his destination. For the Bishop was a shabby old man; very poor, very feeble, very lethargic. The diocese was a crumbling village—the palace a broken-down villa. Casanova, with the optimism of the born adventurer, had pictured the Bishop as a mighty dignitary—the palace as a sort of miniature Vatican. All adventurers are



optimists ; they could not continue for six months unless they were upheld by this mirage of life.

Instantly he decided to abandon thoughts of the Church. Much of the success of Casanova's adventures was due to this power of quick decision, this adaptability, this "cutting" of his losses. Whenever he saw a certain avenue closed, he abandoned it for another. He did not wait to break down a barred door—he simply knocked at another.

However, the Church still appealed to him, perhaps because he realized that his plausible gifts might cause him to travel far in a profession that appeals so much to the emotions. On his return to Rome after the disastrous end of his Calabrian journey, he gained a position as secretary to an important prelate. His chief qualifications were his effrontery, his good manners, and his subtle gift of flattery.

And now all went well for him. He made many friends. The Cardinal was delighted with his young protégé. Casanova prospered—earned considerable sums—and was on the road to promotion. Then his inevitable eroticism again intervened. There were two exceedingly scandalous affairs—affairs that were scandalous even for an age and a city that was not squeamish—and once more this indefatigable traveller left Rome.

Indeed, throughout his comparatively long life, except for a few years at the end, Casanova was in a state of everlasting journeying. His next trip was to Constantinople, but there he stayed only for a very short time : perhaps there were no dupes in the city of Constantine. Returning to Venice he had an adventure in which he was robbed of his clerical clothes. He took this incident

as an omen. It was fated, he said, that he was not to be a Churchman, and after that night he resolved to give up all thoughts of the clerical life.

Casanova, now seeking a new profession, decided that the army would be a very suitable career for a gentleman of his appearance and talents. It will be clear that the man always chose a showy profession—the spectacular side of life naturally attracted the son of the actor and actress. He now became an officer in the Venetian garrison at Corfu, but the life was a dull business, and, of course, he grew weary of it as he grew weary of everything that kept him in one place for more than a few weeks or months.

He was something of a musician—could play on several instruments moderately well (he never excelled in any arts but those of love-making and cheating), and he went from the army to a small orchestra where he played the violin. It was during this time when he was earning an income that just enabled him to live, that Casanova had an adventure that proved a very fortunate affair for him in his hard-up condition.

A rich senator, Zuan Bragardin, happened to be seized with sudden illness in the street. Casanova came along and at once shouldered his way through the crowd, proclaiming that he was a doctor. Naturally he was always ready for an adventure that might prove profitable. He tended the old man successfully—so successfully that Bragardin was convinced that he would have died but for the coming of the self-styled doctor.

Now this Bragardin was half a fool—half an occultist. Suddenly he conceived the idea that Casanova had been sent to his aid by some supernatural intervention. Casanova,



who himself dabbled in the occult without believing a syllable of its teaching, naturally supported the notion, perceiving in it a very powerful recommendation to patronage and to favours.

Nor was he wrong in this optimism. There followed for the adventurer an experience that caused him intense satisfaction. He found himself installed in the palace of Bragardin. Presents were given him—money was at his disposal when he desired it (which was probably very often), and the grateful senator actually settled upon him a liberal allowance, which continued for many years after Casanova's departure from the palace.

Encouraged by the senatorial belief in his occult powers, Casanova proceeded to trade on this supposed esoteric knowledge. At a period when people were only too ready to be duped and played upon, when wizards, wonder-workers and charlatans of all ages and all colours (white, black, brown, yellow), were at the zenith of their industry, Casanova found a ready and a remunerative market. It is possible that he came to believe, more or less sincerely, in his imaginary powers of evoking the dead—of reading the future—of seeing people and things at a distance through a magic crystal. Your true adventurer is something of a metaphysician—reality is to him an elusive thing—and since all man's efforts cannot bring him face to face with truth, why worry too grievously as to whether a gift is false or real?

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One imagines that this period was, perhaps, the happiest of his life. He had money, ease, comfort, good food,



good wines, a sort of social success, and above all women. He was all things to all people. He interpreted Saint Paul's command with a literalness which would have shocked the apostle. He could be gentle or rough, courteous or insolent, humble or proud, according to place, circumstance and the human factor concerned. . . . When he saw himself in a new rôle, whether it were barrister, priest, doctor, diplomatist, cabalist, astrologer, crystal-gazer, he always projected himself into that rôle by a sort of sub-conscious impulse, and presently became approximately, if not wholly, the personage that he desired to impersonate. It is this auto-suggestion that is frequently the chief cause of the success of the adventurer. When your modern Casanova goes to Savile Row and orders four suits of clothes and tells the assistant that he is staying at the Ritz, for the moment the liar almost believes that he is indeed so situated, and when leaving the shop might, for a moment, be on the point of taking himself there and not to his lodgings in Soho. . . . Conviction is the secret of the finest acting, and whilst all actors are not adventurers, all adventurers are certainly mummers, and very clever mummers !

It must be said, however, in favour of this subtle rogue, that throughout his long pilgrimage toward his sad and lonely end, he caused little enduring sorrow. The majority of the people on whom he sponged or whom he robbed with more or less frankness, were people who could well afford to be thus victimized. Nor did he occasion much misery to women. He trod the primrose path without crushing down the primroses too heavily. . . . He was far too indifferent to genuine passion to evoke it to any extent. To women he was generous when he had the

means—he never thought about the morrow and its chances, and would leave himself without a sequin in order to bestow a handsome jewel on a chance love. . . .

Not for an instant did marriage come to his scheme of life. Nor thoughts of marriage! It was too constant a thing. He hated permanence, regarding life as a gorgeous soap bubble. For this reason he would never burden himself with belongings—furniture, pictures, houses. The life of the hotel—the life of somebody else's house—with responsibility shorn to nothingness, was what he loved. He would have agreed with Thoreau, that a man more often belongs to his house and his furniture than do the house and the furniture to the man.

From Rome he went to Paris, the city he loved best. Here he was always at home, adoring the people for their wit, their light-heartedness, their nimble immoralities. In Paris he fed to the uttermost his appetite for the life of the theatre. Posing as the son of an Italian comedian of renown, he went behind the scenes of the Comedie Française and other playhouses, making love to the actresses and gaining a reputation as an amusing and brilliant entertainer.

In 1753 he returned to Venice, a complete Parisian, boasting of his friends in Paris—telling flaming stories of his success there as a cabalist. And now this intimate of ambassadors and cocottes began to assume what we moderns call “side.” He swaggered, boasted, and became so aggressive that many resentments followed. Obsessed by vanity, he forgot diplomacy and made enemies. Among them was a certain senator—a member of the Inquisitional Tribunal. This person set spies to work. The



spies reported that Casanova was a sinister personage—an infidel and a dealer in magic. Casanova with his customary luck escaped being burned, but was arrested and imprisoned in a dungeon in the Doge's palace.

Here in a damp, insect-haunted solitude Casanova endured the most wretched days of his life. But he was not the man to endure with philosophical resignation. Immediately his agile brain began to think out a way of escape. He was ignorant of the motives for his arrest—but he did not waste time pondering the problem. In his *Memoirs* he relates how after many abortive attempts, he was at last successful, in company with another prisoner, in escaping by way of the roof. It was a difficult and elaborate affair—it was attended with terrible risks, but personal courage was never lacking in the character of the adventurer. He fled from Venice, having spent twelve months in prison. It must have shocked him to contemplate twelve precious months wasted in a cell.

Yet, perhaps, not entirely wasted. For in that solitude Casanova, perhaps for the first time, meditated on life. He began to realize that he had done little good with his thirty-two years. He told himself that he must now carve out a substantial career. But, of course, he did nothing of the sort. The essence of his nature was fluid. He could not concentrate for any length of time.

Returning to Paris, he now supported himself on an allowance from the faithful Bragardin. And now, Casanova began to see himself in the rôle of a titanic financier. To realize his dream, he sought out a former acquaintance, a M. De Bernis, Minister for Foreign Affairs. Years previously, he had helped Bernis when the Minister was involved in a difficult love affair. The Minister now



showed his gratitude by receiving the adventurer with great kindness. He introduced him to a number of financier friends, and in the result, Casanova became a Director of State Lotteries. (France at that time was desperately poor after manifold wars, and was ready to adopt any method to raise money.)

This new task suited Casanova admirably. As we know, he loved gambling, and he must have thrilled to find himself associated with a national gamble. Throwing all his powers into the work, he succeeded well and made a big income for himself, at the same time infusing new vigour into the antiquated methods of the established officials.

Everybody was delighted with the new Director. Casanova had learned a lesson during his year in prison and had shed his overbearing manners. He was regarded as a sound and enterprising man of affairs, and it was not surprising, therefore, that the Government presently entrusted him with an important financial mission to Holland. This transaction involving many millions of francs was carried out triumphantly. Casanova returned to France with a fortune that would have enabled him to live all his life in comfort, if not in state, had he been the sort of man to arrange matters to that wise end. Instantly, however, he began to squander the money. He took a gorgeous apartment in the city and a house in the country, where money was spent on all sorts of absurd and fantastic devices. He had no intention of retaining the house ; permanence of any kind, as we know, was his chief horror, but the proprietorial grandeur appealed to him for the moment, and he revelled in his new state.

Casanova was now at a point when he might have

achieved great things. His wits and his adaptability had brought him wealth and position—moreover, he had gained a place in the world of government. Had he been like the “Soames Forsyte” of Mr. Galsworthy, he would have “taken a course and stuck to it.” Had he done this, we might to-day be writing of Casanova, the powerful Minister of State—of Casanova, the founder of a princely house of commerce. But few men can go further than their nature. . . . Very soon he was mixed up with scandalous affairs, wherein, of course, women played the chief parts. Once more he ran away, leaving behind him debts, outraged husbands, faithless wives, and a large number of duped persons.

To Holland he returned, having, perhaps, a sentimental attachment to a country where he had amassed so much money. Here he gave himself a title, and was afterwards known as the “Chevalier de Seingalt.”

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It was in England, amid the fogs and respectability of this much-abused island, that Casanova, having reached his highest point, began to decline. He had come to this country after certain vexations in Holland. In his *Memoirs* he writes : “I have noted this time, September 1763, as one of the curses of my existence. Indeed, it was frequently then that I began to feel that I was growing old, though I was only thirty-eight. . . .”

He hated the cold, and the fogs, and above all the chilly character of the people. Chiefly he resented the fact that in England he had small success as a lover. One “affair,” which began light-heartedly, ended after the



fashion of the episode of "Mrs. Page" and Sir John Falstaff. The young woman played manifold tricks with the Italian, and at the end mocked him by leaving him humiliated, defeated, a thing of ridicule. The Memoirs hold an accurate account of the business, and Casanova, with great frankness, has omitted no humiliation. How he hated that woman! She had committed the worst outrage that man or woman could commit against him—she had cut into his self-esteem and left a bleeding wound.

England, having proved unresponsive financially and amorously, he decided to try his fortune in Berlin. In that city he soon found persons who, fascinated by his manners and his appearance, gave him a sort of welcome. Encouraged by this success, Casanova sought an audience with the King, Frederick II, to whom he proposed with his usual audacity a tremendous scheme for national prosperity. However, Frederick snubbed him rather cruelly, and Casanova went away, disgruntled, enraged.

Again he wandered. He simply could not remain in one place. If he was not thrust out of it by boot or circumstance, he went because his restless spirit drove him. He now travelled to Russia, prepared to endure all the horrors and the miseries of the travel of those times, rather than remain stagnant. He went to Moscow, to Riga, and eventually found himself in Poland.

Here he carried on his usual life, gambling, sponging, making love, eating and drinking too much, and sometimes gaining fame by fighting desperate duels. In Warsaw he might have secured some success, for his courage and his abandon had attracted the people, who love personal bravery above all things. But he failed again! He was detected in some piece of chicane, and presently



rumours of his many expulsions from other countries came to the ears of authority. At length, the King, Stanislas, signed an order for his dismissal from Poland.

And now there followed for this adventurer a long, long series of travels, wherein he found himself everlastingly buffeted this way and that. He went to Vienna (one of his favourite cities), but his ill-fame had gone before him, like an evil odour. He was turned out by the police.

In his despair—with the majority of European cities fast shutting their gates against him—he suddenly be-thought himself of Spain. Hitherto he had left that country unvisited. And so to Spain he now fared gloomily. But they were ready for him in that lethargic country, and for once, the lethargy was forgotten. . . . Casanova was hustled into a sort of house of detention, and after a short stay there, he was politely dismissed from Spain, with a hint that his return was not desirable.

Italy was his home, and to Italy the exile now turned his fading hopes. He went to Naples and having borrowed money from a travelling acquaintance, proceeded to wander from place to place, faring like the adventurer of all times—to-day in rags—to-morrow in purple and fine linen—to-night sleeping in a flea-haunted loft—to-morrow night on the softest of beds, with some companion (man or woman), who had taken pity on him and brought him to that easy place !

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Casanova was now growing old, as age was reckoned in an insanitary and short-lived generation. He was merely fifty, but he had packed so many exhausting ex-

periences into the time that he felt that he was at least five hundred years old !

Women were now regarding him with chilly looks. That was his dominant sorrow ! He could have endured with a certain resignation poverty, kicks, exile, bad food, hard beds, but the smiles of women were as vital to him as the beatings of his heart.

There was a good reason for this coldness on the part of women. Although Casanova was a man of exceptional vigour, his dissipations had affected him enormously. He looked older than his age. Of his former beauty there now remained only the stately figure, the eagle features, the graceful movements. The eyes were faded—the cheeks were thin. When he looked in the glass, he must have felt the ice dropping on his heart.

In those days he may have often sat and pondered concerning his former conquests, living them over again with the thin smile of the reminiscent rake. He may have thought of Madame D'Urfe (whom he defrauded of large sums by means of mock spiritualistic phenomena), of Francesca Buschini, of Manon Balletti, of "Zaire," of Madame Dubois, of the shopgirls in Turin—and in Paris—of the long, long regiment of bright eyes and glistening shapes that had marched before him on the parade-ground of the past.

Broken and beaten down, Casanova at length resolved to go home to his native city. He hesitated, however, to do this, for he remembered that he had escaped from prison there and might be recaptured and sent into confinement for the remainder of his life. Something of his former ingenuity came to his aid. He decided to appeal to the Inquisitorial authorities for pardon, on



the ground that he had written a certain pamphlet that had won their satisfaction.

The Inquisitional authorities having many important matters to consider, perhaps thought it inadvisable to sustain an ancient grievance. After all Casanova was not a heretic in the ordinary sense—his “magic” had doubtless been more a matter of money-making than of conviction. After some deliberation, they announced that he might return to Venice without fear of arrest. He went back at once, and then proceeded to carry out an audacious scheme that had occurred to him “en route.”

He went to the very tribunal that had condemned him and offered his services as spy or secret agent. He pointed out that his histrionic powers would prove admirable qualifications for the work. Once again he was successful. The authorities came to the conclusion that he was the very person for the work: difficult operations involved. Casanova was engaged, but on the understanding that he was to receive no retaining salary, but merely a fee for each piece of information that proved of definite value.

He now began to take heart again. He made new acquaintances, and prevailed upon a young dressmaker to share his rooms. The girl was devotedly fond of him. He treated her well, as indeed he had always treated his mistresses. There was no brutality in Casanova—his emotions did not go deep enough for animal savagery.

He enjoyed his new work, perhaps because it was varied. Not only had he to spy out heretics. His duties lay also in the direction of the enforcement of morality. He had to visit the “stews” of the city—report on houses of ill-fame—cause notorious offenders to be arrested. One smiles at the contemplation of Casanova



as a "censor morum," but one imagines that he flung himself whole-heartedly into his part and played it like the fine actor that he was.

But here, as elsewhere, there was no continuity. It is possible that Casanova's "bag" was not sufficiently large—his captures not sufficiently important—to satisfy his employers. After a short experiment, the spy was dismissed.

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It is possible that the dismissal did not trouble him greatly. The work, no doubt, was beginning to bore the roving spirit, and we may feel tolerably certain that sooner or later he would himself have ended the engagement.

He had saved little money during his official labours, and was virtually penniless. But this fact did not discourage him. Once more, he contrived to raise funds by judicious borrowings, and then began his last wanderings. Those wanderings, which he undertook at the age of fifty-eight, a broken, tired-out man, took him up and down Europe. How he lived we can only conjecture—probably he sponged on every conceivable spongee—sometimes he may have done a little cheating. He revisited Austria, lounged through Holland, and in 1783 was again in his well-loved Paris. Here there seems to have been a sort of renaissance of his imaginative audacities. He suddenly saw himself as a contriver of magnificent schemes for the advancement of science and society. One of the schemes was the making of a huge European canal! None of these Gargantuan shapes travelled further than a few designs—a few specifications—a few notes.

The last phase of this strange, eventful history was now

approaching. Thin, haggard, old, but still upright, gallant, jaunty, Casanova when he was close on sixty met, in Teplitz, the Count de Waldstein. That generous-hearted aristocrat was moved to pity. He had known the man in his earlier years—the difference shocked him. Perceiving that Casanova was entirely at the end of his tether, without money, without hope, he offered him straightway a position as librarian at his castle at Dux in Bohemia. The salary was good ; the work, though dull, was congenial to the worn-out traveller, who, in the midst of his panoramic excitements, had always loved the written word.

And so, to Dux Casanova went, and there all would have been well, but for the fact that he could not forget that he was the “Chevalier de Seingalt.” The fictitiousness of the title did not weigh with him ; it is possible that long since he had come to believe in its reality. He gave himself “airs”—and was insolent to the Count’s servants, who doubtless regarded the librarian as a little lower than the assistant butler. They ridiculed his assumption of nobility. All sorts of petty persecutions were thrust upon him. He would ring his bell, but nobody would come to answer the summons. He would order a meal, and would find the order ignored.

No longer was he adaptable. Age, sorrow, and, perhaps, an ingrowing knowledge that he had wasted his life, had robbed him of resilience. He wrote long, self-pitying letters to friends. Some of them ignored the letters—others laughed and wrote ironical answers. The Count, to whom Casanova constantly appealed, was largely sympathetic, but frankly told him that he could do nothing to improve the situation.



At length Casanova found a sort of resignation among the books that surrounded him. He spent his long days reading and writing. He had a vast knowledge of men and things—he had the power of stringing together words with a measure of attractiveness. In those days and nights at Dux, in the quiet library, with mocking servants sometimes peering at the old man through the windows, he wrote the “Memoirs.”

The writing of them must have given him a kind of mournful joy. He now traversed the old road of the past, smiling as the gay adventures rolled back upon his vision. There is pathos in this—is there not?—not meretricious pathos, but the real thing, as we think of Casanova in that dim library—see the mocking eyes at the window—see the old man smiling as he goes back to days of Arcady!

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This was the final phase of Casanova. He remained at Dux, doing his work admirably and bravely, until the end. Early in 1798 he fell ill. Many people who had known him in the past now came to see him—to look upon the adventurous old lion whose last roar had long since faded out. One wonders how he felt when he realized that his time-limit was at hand. It must have been hard for him to go—had he not himself often said that life under the worst conditions was better than death? Yet we are told by more than one authority that he was resigned. He died on the 4th June, 1798, and was buried in the local cemetery.

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The character of Giacomo Casanova was a mass of contradictions. He would be generous and mean—brave



and cowardly—honest and deceitful. Perhaps this phenomenon was due to the fact that like many men obsessed by a histrionic temperament, he was never quite positive concerning what he really was himself. He had played so many parts that he was confused. . . .

For years this wonderful personage had perfect health. He had only one serious illness throughout his long life. When one remembers his comfortless travels, his exhausting amours, his strenuous days and nights, one may well be amazed by so tremendous a constitution. He never moderated his eating and drinking, but took his fill of all that he wanted. After a day spent in travelling—a night in dancing and revelling—he would still have enough energy remaining to woo some chance love and spend some hours with her before seeking rest. Like Napoleon, he could sleep at any time—in any place—in any circumstances. To this gift he may have owed his remarkable health and resilience.

In thought, he was passionately independent. The *Memoirs* reveal him as a man who accepts no conventions—who thinks for himself in every relation of life. This independence was probably due to supreme egotism. Himself invariably dominated the scene—and to flatter himself, decorate himself, win admiration for himself, became something of an obsession.

To say that he fascinated everybody would be a platitude. But the fascination passed. In a recent remarkable study of Casanova, M. Joseph Le Gras writes :

“ His fascination was like that of a fine portrait which one has to look at from some distance. . . . ”

Precisely ! When one came to know Casanova in-

timately, something faded. The blotches stood out—the glamour died. That is why he made no lasting friendships, though he had a thousand acquaintances—a hundred half-admiring, half-pitying patrons! But one imagines that the absence of friendship did not trouble him—probably he preferred one woman adorer to fifty Damons or Jonathans.

The largest section of his life was the section filled by women. He was an artistic wooer, knowing that there is no greater fallacy than the theory that all women are alike. He wooed each one according to her humour and her temperament. He would flatter, bully, cajole, threaten, entreat, command, according to mood and circumstance. It is possible that women sometimes resisted him—even the most successful rake has his occasional set-backs; but in the *Memoirs* he skims lightly over his defeats, and like a good warrior, concentrates on his victories.

He was a catholic lover—as ready to make love to a kitchen maid as to a queen. All that he desired was beauty and a certain sprightliness. He was never grossly animal in the sense that he would snatch a fleeting satisfaction from any woman who came along his path. A mere handsome figure—a pretty face—would not attract him if the woman were a dullard and a fool.

The face of Casanova is known to us as it looked in youth by a portrait painted by his brother. We see strong, luminous eyes, with very long lashes, a nose aquiline, thin, sensitive, a smooth forehead, a chin admirably modelled. The figure is tall, slender, graceful. The head is neither too large nor too small. The mouth is sensuous, but by no means coarse. The impression forced upon one is the impression of strength and con-

fidence. He loved his good looks, regarded them as an asset, and traded on them at all times. When at a later time, hard living and age were working the inevitable degeneration of feature and face, his despair as he looked in his mirror must have been the despair of a soul that has lost all faith in its salvation.

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Casanova wrote hugely during those last years at Dux, but of his writings, the Memoirs alone hold enduring vitality. They present a picture of travel, of European life, manners, and adventure that few "picaresque" novels have equalled. The Memoirs were based upon countless notes that from time to time he recorded—from a mass of letters which he invariably preserved.

In addition to these Memoirs, he wrote the *Soliloquy of a Thinker*, and a long bizarre volume called *L'Icosameron*—a mixture of adventure, theology, philosophy, and a dozen other ingredients. In all his writings, there is the note of egotism—perhaps no more subjective type of mind existed than the mind of this epic adventurer.

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In our last survey, what shall we say of this extraordinary character? Perhaps we may tell ourselves that early in life he had felt, consciously or sub-consciously, the futility of life in relation to rank, ribands, decorations, and honours—had told himself that the reality of existence (or as close as man may come to reality) is to be found only in the senses. Indeed, in his writings, he frequently emphasizes the view that the life of the sense affords the



most satisfactory experience. He had much spirit—but little spirituality.

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Casanova possessed a dynamic force—a genius—but the force and the genius came to nothing. He was a failure, and he knew it long before the end came. . . . He reminds us, perhaps, of a great dynamo, built to give light and power to a noble city, with its museums, its picture galleries, its schools, its homes. The dynamo is set to work, but there is only one wire to conduct the light . . . And that wire terminates in a house of ill-fame !





MADAME DU BARRY



# Jeanne du Barry

(1746–1793)

**I**N dealing with Jeanne du Barry we are dealing with a personage of a type widely different from her contemporary Madame de Pompadour. For that lady was primarily and essentially a political person—moved more by the hard springs of politics than by any emotion of love. In Jeanne we have the plaything type of woman ; content with her dolls, forced, perhaps, for an hour into intrigues of which she knows nothing, for which she cares nothing—a puppet pulled this way and that way by diplomats, priests, hangers-on of all sorts. A woman of the Pompadour kind would have played her cards differently—might, indeed, have ended as revolutionary leader—a friend of Robespierre. Jeanne, on the other hand, was always the servant rather than the mistress of circumstance.

In the tiny town of Vaucouleurs (the birthplace also of Joan of Arc) Jeanne was born on the 19th August, 1746. She was illegitimate. Her mother, Anne Bécu, was a domestic servant. Her father may have been anything that such nebulous people are—a sailor (some have said), a monk, a tax-collector.

Anne Bécu, coming to live in Paris, sent her child to the Convent of St. Anne, where Jeanne remained until she was fifteen. The life at this convent was rigorous. The ascetism—the cruelty of the régime, so far from developing any spiritual sense in the child, drove her to long for the time when she could indulge her sensuous emotions outside the convent walls.

When that much-looked-for moment arrived, Jeanne began to earn a vague living by peddling cheap jewellery from door to door in Paris. It is possible that this choice

of a trade was urged by a passion for rare stones that endured to the end of her life.

The door-to-door journeyings did not continue for any length of time, for a certain Madame Lagarde, whose interest Jeanne had won in the course of her wanderings through the city, took the girl into her house, partly as companion, partly as seamstress. In that house, Jeanne learned something of the rudiments of life amongst educated persons. Voltaire, Marmontel, and Grimm were frequent visitors.

All was going well for Jeanne—and Madame Lagarde had promised to find for her a suitable husband when the enterprising young woman relieved her patron of that task by having a brief, but rather ardent affair, with a son of the house. For Jeanne, we must acknowledge, was a born courtesan—untouched, however, by the hardness of the professional huckster of charms. She went by a sort of natural volition to the arms of men.

Madame Lagarde furiously sent her from the house, and Jeanne after a short interval got work in the shop of a milliner, M. Labille, in the Rue St. Honore. Here she assumed the name of “Lancon”—one of the several names she owned during the early part of her career.

The modern shopper, accustomed to the decorous “Printemps” in Paris or to Messrs. Peter Robinson’s in London, can hardly form an accurate picture of the millinery shop of the more expensive kind in Paris of the eighteenth century. It was a rendezvous for the “bloods” and rakes of the city. They peered at and ogled the assistants through the windows; they made assignations with “billets-doux,” thrust under the very noses of shopwalkers and proprietors. It is probable that Jeanne was attracted by this fact when she turned her attention to



the business of a milliner. The life delighted her, and she fitted into it from the beginning. Years afterwards, she wrote of those days :

“ I now began an existence very different from the life of the convent. There all was wearisome and dull and often we were harshly punished. . . . Here we may talk of what we choose, may laugh and sing as much as we like. . . . Each of us had a small but pleasant room. My godfather had my apartment decorated . . . he gave me a very fine pierglass, a table, four chairs, and a velvet chair, most splendidly gilt. When my fellow workers came to see me, the grand furniture caused them amazement and delight.”

The first serious love affair of Jeanne was a democratic business. A young confectioner whom she met casually near the shop was the man who seems to have made a lasting impression, for years later, when a long procession of lovers had travelled through her life, she spoke of this youth and said that he was “ better than any of the others. . . .” However, she was sufficiently versatile to leave him presently for a young hairdresser, who spent all his money on Jeanne and then fled to England to avoid imprisonment for debt.

The girl, now an accomplished trader in erotic markets, became the mistress of Jean, Comte du Barry. He was an attractive fellow of the tall, melodramatic type. The son of an old Toulouse family, he was a gambler who lived on his wits and the remains of his fortune. He established Jeanne in his house, a place where men came to gamble and sometimes to cheat. The ingenious Du Barry saw in her an excellent attraction for his gaming-rooms.

He was no ordinary roué and gamester, this Jean du Barry, he was a man of extraordinary ability, with a keen



brain and a sense of diplomacy that might have won him a place in the highest rank had he chosen to devote his talents to unsordid ends. But he wanted what is called by Americans "easy money"—and he now saw in Jeanne a probable investment that might bring him immense sums and endow him with a sort of borrowed power. Louis XV and Versailles were now his objectives. He decided that Jeanne should become the mistress of that amorous personage.

How was this to be brought about? He was aware that Louis was not over-scrupulous in his choice of ladies—but even Louis might resent an unceremonious thrusting upon him of a discarded mistress of the Comte du Barry. It was necessary that the King should himself make the initial move. Guided by that possibility, Du Barry secured the help of Lebel, the King's chief valet—a sort of major-domo of the Royal love affairs.

Lebel was induced to give in his rooms at the palace a supper party, to which Jeanne was invited. She went there joyous, excited. When she had drunk sufficient wine to enhance her colour and her beauty, Lebel told the King that he had discovered a new Helen, and suggested that Louis should peep at her through a chink in the wall. Louis peeped and was satisfied. That same night, Jeanne was sent for to the King's apartments.

His Majesty was delighted with her behaviour at that first meeting. Unlike many women who had been brought to him, she made no pretence of innocence or coquetry, but was frank, good-humoured, obviously ready to love and to be loved. Nevertheless, the King hesitated before entering into permanent association. Impossible for a ruler of France to carry on a definite liaison with an acknowledged courtesan. Rank of some kind must attach to her.

However, this difficulty was soon surmounted. The ingenious brain of Jean du Barry set to work. He himself was married, but he remembered that his brother, the Comte Guillaume du Barry, a quiet country gentleman, was fortunately a bachelor. Guillaume, a good-natured simple fellow, was brought from his retirement and formally married to Jeanne. On hearing of the marriage, Louis is said to have laughed heartily and remarked : " Good ! She is now the Comtesse du Barry, and you may bring her as soon as you please to me at Compiègne ! "

A cynical, cold-blooded business this, but all of it fitting perfectly into the period—an artificial period—a period of exaggerated courtesies and abominable obscenities—a period marked out by every precedent of history—by every mouthing of the preacher—to be the prelude of disaster.

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For the sake of formality, Jeanne remained with her husband, Guillaume, for one month after the ceremony. The accommodating Guillaume then went back to the country like another Cincinnatus, his work done, and his fields and pastures awaiting him. Jeanne now found herself installed in an apartment at Versailles immediately above the King's rooms. A house in the neighbourhood was taken for her servants and carriages.

With the traditional adaptability of women, Jeanne appears to have glided easily and gracefully into her new surroundings. She carried herself with modest dignity—committed few solecisms—was liked by everybody. Immediately, she developed a love of luxury, grandeur, and beautiful things that formed her chief characteristic



throughout her life. She began to collect furniture, china, bronzes, marbles, pictures, jewels. From all parts of France dealers came to her, knowing that very rarely did she refuse to buy.

Louis was delighted with his new favourite. He had grown sick of political women, and after being bored (in all probability) by La Pompadour, he was glad to find in Jeanne a person who knew little of politics and cared for nothing except kisses and the upholstery of life.

At the time of Jeanne's entrance to Versailles, the Duc de Choiseul, originally brought into prominence by Madame de Pompadour, was the virtual ruler of France. He had served in many ministerial posts and was now Chief Minister. From the outset, De Choiseul suspected in Jeanne du Barry an enemy who might eventually wield a power comparable with that of the late favourite, La Pompadour. His enmity was probably deepened by the fact that his sister, the Duchesse de Grammont, had been harshly snubbed by Louis, who placed that lady in the category of his hated "political women."

The brother's animosity was due to a very natural fear that Jeanne's power would usurp his own: the sister's dislike was due to a resentment that a girl of the people should have leaped to her present position. Brother and sister now sought every means of weakening the position of Du Barry.

The Duchess employed the meanest of tricks. She hired gutter-poets to write verses and lampoons that with thinly-covered hints and sallies ridiculed the new favourite of Louis. The less reputable newspapers published articles wherein Du Barry, under another name, was cruelly slandered. The vindictive Duchess enlisted, moreover, the aid of Voltaire, and that com-



plaisant person wrote for her a pamphlet, *The King of Bedlam*, wherein he satirized Jeanne with his usual caustic ferocity.

It is possible that these attacks might have seriously injured Jeanne had not her inherent sweetness and tactfulness caused them to leap off from her before they could inflict enduring harm. Her conduct at that time was very largely inspired by daily letters of counsel from her former lover, the Comte du Barry. He explained how she was to treat her enemies—how to retain her friends. His correspondence was a brilliant contribution to social diplomacy. Jeanne, a ready student, obeyed his instructions and remained a very solid fixture at Versailles.

To consolidate her position, she now asked for a formal presentation at Court. The Comte had suggested this ceremonial—it is more than conceivable that Jeanne herself would have been contented with gifts, kisses, and the bon-bons of life.

The De Choiseul party naturally opposed this presentation with vigour. However, their opposition availed nothing. Very soon, a suitable person was found to present Jeanne—a Madame de Bearn, who desired to gain her support in a lawsuit.

On April 22nd, 1769, Versailles was in a state of excitement, for that day had been appointed for the presentation. Everybody had assembled—the King, the Dauphin, the Princesses. But Jeanne did not come, and immediately De Choiseul and his friends rejoiced, hoping or believing that some breakdown had occurred. The King himself, terribly agitated, paced up and down the room, biting his nails. At length, Jeanne came—looking (as one chronicler has written) “so beautiful—so delicious—that even her enemies could not say a word against her. . . .”

The presentation was successful. The young Princesses, fascinated, refused to let her kneel. Louis was delighted. He had been afraid lest there should be domestic resentment. The complaisance of his daughters seemed a good augury for his new venture in love-making.

Her position was now assured. But its certainty did not make of her a beggar on horseback. Jeanne was a woman of character. None other, when suddenly thrust into a Court, would have held fast to modesty and good-nature. She was restrained, sweet, never made another woman jealous. It is true that at a later time she developed an insane extravagance, but in those early days she kept her affairs in order and was a good economist. Indeed, so admirable was her conduct that even the hostile section of the Court was to some extent conquered.

Choiseul remained the implacable enemy. Disgusted by the prolonged success of a woman whose downfall he had, perhaps, anticipated as a swift sequel to her conquest, he showed his disgust by leaving Paris for some time. On his return, he found Jeanne still in great favour, with a house and estate at Luciennes, near Marly. She was now sought after by everybody of distinction. Books were dedicated to the Du Barry—poets wrote sonnets about her. Witticisms, of which she was innocent, were attributed to her.

In spite of these adherents, however, Jeanne might have fared badly had not the Church chosen to support her for purposes of its own against the De Choiseul party. There seems some irony in a religious body thus openly standing by a courtesan, but one imagines that the Church in past centuries was rarely over-scrupulous in the choice of its weapons. Another ally for Jeanne was found in the Duc D'Aguillon (who, according to some historians, was



at a later time a lover of that lady), and a sort of cabal was thus formed against De Choiseul, his sister and the party hostile to the new favourite.

Moreover, the King himself was brought into the quarrel by an insulting remark that De Choiseul made in regard to Jeanne. Louis now showed a certain coldness to the minister and smiled upon D'Aguillon. But he could not bring himself at that stage to dismiss De Choiseul. He was an ageing man, and hated the prospect of new faces in his political entourage.

Let us be charitable to De Choiseul, and let us assume that he was not altogether jealous of a rival when he tried to bring about the effacement of Du Barry. It is possible that this stern supporter of an ancient régime was honestly shocked to see a girl of the people so close to the throne—so firmly established there. He had hoped that the Dauphine, Marie Antoinette, would have influenced Louis towards a higher sense of propriety, but Jeanne, consciously or unconsciously, had prejudiced the King against the young Princess.

Meantime D'Aguillon and his friends were everlastingly impressing upon Jeanne that her position was in danger whilst De Choiseul remained a power in France. At length, Louis, yielding to a hundred subtle influences, believing, also, that De Choiseul was endeavouring to bring about a war to serve certain purposes of his own, incontinently dismissed his minister without further hesitation.

It is an amazing thing that there was no personal bitterness on the part of minister and favourite towards each other. Indeed, when De Choiseul was leaving the palace for the last time, he bowed with much graciousness to Jeanne, who was watching from a window, and kissed



his hand. Jeanne, equally magnanimous, secured for him a pension of 60,000 livres and added to it a present of 100,000 crowns. She was incapable of spite or littleness of soul.

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Although Jeanne du Barry was necessarily brought into contact with many political events, her real claim to notoriety or fame lies, not in her influence upon politics (which was practically nothing), but rather in her astounding extravagance. When one reads the records of her spendings, one wonders how any one woman could have spent so much !

For, certainly, it was not the wild, blatant extravagance of the beggar on horseback. She did not buy for the sake of buying, but because she could not refrain from the collection of beautiful things. It has been suggested by more than one writer that the peasant prudence latent in the brain of Jeanne may have urged her to accumulate assets that at a later time might prove useful. But this theory does not seem very sound. There was nothing of the hard-calculating French peasant in Jeanne. Moreover, her position must have seemed to her secure enough to shut out any fears for the future.

Paris danced and revelled at this time, as she had danced and revelled for centuries, but already shadows were travelling towards the dancers. The end of an era was at hand. Voltaire, Rousseau, D'Alembert—the philosophers and the men of science—were attacking old faiths, old illusions. The crust of aristocracy—the “divine right of kings,” was being undermined.

Madame Du Barry read philosophical books in a diletante way, but learned nothing from them. There were

authors who spoke of the mad extravagance of the ruling classes, but these writers she, perhaps, dismissed as mere jealous starvelings, who envied a condition which they could not attain. So far from being influenced towards retrenchment, she began to spend more extravagantly. Millions were squandered on a jewel. All day long, her house was assailed by tradespeople—one section bringing articles for her approval, the other section flinging bills into the hands of her servants. Bills, bills, bills, Jeanne paced out her days to the accompaniment of the rustling of those disagreeable bits of paper. However, she went on buying. She clothed her servants as magnificently as herself. Her negro servant "Zamore" had a wardrobe of clothes that would have maintained a peasant family in comfort for a period of years.

The house at Luciennes, built for her by Ledoux, the celebrated architect, was a square pavilion with five rows of windows on each side. Here Jeanne frequently received Louis, and provided diversions for his worn-out palate. The King doubtless enjoyed these somewhat frivolous entertainments more than the dignified revels provided by the Pompadour. The latter had bored him with stodgy concerts, where dull, if good music, was the chief enjoyment. Du Barry maintained a theatre with a repertory company of comedians, and here the most indecently witty plays were acted. Louis enjoyed himself immensely, and the theatre at Luciennes was at this time his chief amusement. Moreover, Jeanne had some excellent cooks, and gave the King and his friends many pleasant repasts. She herself never cared much for eating and drinking.

Rather was she a spoiled child, but a kindly one—craving for new toys in the guise of jewels, furniture,



china, pictures, bronzes, anything expensive. Hating solemnity, viewing life with the joy of one who skims the surface, but shrinks from the depths, she went her way perhaps more entirely happy than any King's favourite in recorded history. The Horatian maxim *Carpe diem* would probably have been her best-loved maxim had she known its meaning !

Her liaison did little to enhance the respect for kingship. Irresponsible and thoughtless, she continually besmirched Court traditions by childish tricks. An Englishman (with a wit not usually associated with Englishmen) said of Louis and Jeanne : " The day will come when the crown of France will be nothing but a nightcap for these two lovers ! " People, shocked by many public embraces, recalled the days of the Pompadour, remembering that the very sins of Royalty had seemed to wear a certain dignity when conducted in company with that dignified personage.

It has been suggested that the insane extravagances of the Court and the aristocracy of France, reaching a sensational climax with the advent of Jeanne du Barry, hastened the coming of Revolution. That the rotten foundation must eventually have collapsed, one may feel certain. The actions of Du Barry and her predecessors merely helped to bring about a speedier conclusion.

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As the years passed her extravagance deepened. She gave to everybody without question—was probably swindled by hundreds of people—abandoned all her prudent methods of the early days. But always grateful and loving, she was mindful of her own people. To her mother, who had done little for her, Jeanne gave a house and a farm, and found time among her many diversions to visit the



old woman every fortnight. To her nominal husband, Guillaume du Barry, she gave 60000 francs a year. She endowed the son of the Comte du Barry. It was said that to know Jeanne was to be relieved of freedom from money cares for the term of one's life !

Louis, the amorist to the end of his days, although now nearing old age, could not be restrained from his erotic wanderings. During Jeanne's "tenure" of favour, he had several affairs with other women, but invariably came back to her. His doctors lost no opportunity of stimulating his fading powers, and many aphrodisiacs were administered in his medicines. It is a dreary and disagreeable picture this—the picture of a man who forces himself into slavery of the senses, instead of rejoicing at the opportunity of freedom.

And now Louis was obsessed by a fear that had troubled him at all times—the fear of death. Every month, familiar faces were passing—his grief was egotistical. Whenever he mourned a dead friend, he saw a mirage of his own cutting off. Certain of the more honest-minded clergy lost no chance of impressing upon Louis his approaching death. Indeed, one priest, the Abbé de Beauvais, preaching at Versailles, took for his text the words : "But forty days more, and Nineveh shall be destroyed." "Nineveh," of course, was Louis XV.

The King with the sensitiveness of the sensualist took this warning in its literal sense. The sermon weighed upon him. He said many times that he wished the forty days would pass quickly, so that he might feel at ease.

At Trianon one night he was seized with an attack of small-pox. His terror was now so deep—his remorse so acute—that the opponents of the favourite saw at once a chance to influence the King to dismiss her from the

Court. They swooped down upon this opportunity like vultures seeking flesh. One can imagine the scene. The darkened room—the sickly smell of drugs—the faded old roué, half dead with fear—whilst the priests surrounding the bed point out that even at that late hour he may escape eternal damnation by one act of repentance and dismissal.

He consented. But he was still sufficiently fond of Jeanne to wish to spare her pain. He begged Madame D'Aguillon to take her to her house at Rueil for a time in order that scandal might be avoided. Then he lay back, repeated to himself the words : " We had to part," many times. He seemed to find some consolation in this acquiescence with necessity.

The formal dismissal was conveyed in a letter that reached Jeanne at Rueil several days later.

" VERSAILLES,  
May 12th, 1774.

MADAME,

I hope that you will entertain no doubt of the grief that I feel at being forced to inform you that you are forbidden to appear again at Court, but I am constrained to carry out the commands of the King, who charges me to state that you shall not appear there again until further orders from him. His Majesty, however, gives you permission to visit your aunt, at Pont-aux-Dames, and he will write to the Abbess there, so that you may encounter no hindrance.

I have the honour to be,

Madame,

Your Obedient Servant,

LE DUC DE LAVRILLIERE."

A "lettre-de-cachet" this. Its harshness—its firmness, were unmistakable. It is said that Jeanne, who rarely used bad language, uttered a terrible word, when she read the lines. But with the sanguineness of her kind, she did not realize, even then, that her sovereignty had ended.

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In May, 1774, the King died. There followed the usual rush of the rats ready to leave a ship that had not sunk, but which might sink with the next wave. The majority of Jeanne's friends fell away from her—some with tactful excuses, others with abrupt rudeness. Her one-time lover, the Comte Jean du Barry (the parasite who had lived on her, boasted, too, that he had received from Jeanne several millions of francs), was the first to go. He went to Lausanne, so that he might be at a distance from her, if she desired to ask his help. He may also have been moved by the cowardly fear that the downfall of Jeanne might react on himself, and bring him into social and political troubles.

To the convent of Pont-aux-Dames Jeanne now retired. A narrow home, this, for her, after Versailles, but she fitted into the life with her usual gracefulness and charmed everybody. There was no railing against fate—no ill-humour.

Gradually, a sort of semi-state was given to Madame Du Barry. A number of servants were provided for her at the convent, rules were relaxed. Moreover, the King authorized Ledoux, the architect, to add a new wing to the abbey for the use of Madame. After remaining for some time at Pont-aux-Dames, she at length received permission to leave that place. She at once bought a



small estate near Arpajon, and proceeded to settle down there, entirely happy and satisfied.

Her extravagance now broke out afresh. Always promising to pay, but frequently forgetting, she would sometimes make huge resolves for retrenchment. The next day, the resolves forgotten, she would give extravagant commands. She had a fury for spending money—a fury that her downfall and her chastening experiences at the convent had not killed. At length, assailed by creditors, and really frightened, Jeanne ordered the sale of the treasures of Luciennes. There were Gobelin tapestries, woven by Cozette, pictures by Casanova, Vernet, Teniers, Greuze.

In the gloomy castle where she now lived, Jeanne found small diversions. But always unselfish, she amused herself by nursing her servants when they were ill. One of the servants, says a humorist, “suffered always from indigestion, the other from pregnancy.” She would play cards with her friends; one day using tiny stakes—the next plunging like a gambler gone mad!

For the house at Luciennes she had always longed, and there came at last the time when the new King, influenced by the representations of such of her friends as still remained loyal to her, permitted Jeanne to return to that place. Here began a romance—a romance that, perhaps, touched her more vitally than the affairs that had preceded it. She fell in love with Lord Seymour, whose acquaintance she had made through a letter of sympathy written by her to him when his daughter was sick. The affair ran its brief course. Seymour, a man of feeling, did not formally break off the friendship, but Jeanne saw plainly that as far as he was concerned, it was moribund. She wrote him a short letter, accepting the situation with

apparently Stoic firmness. It was characteristic of this woman that at one time she was the spoiled child, clutching a new toy—at another time, the calmly philosophical woman, viewing life steadily and with the resignation of one who realizes that nothing matters much.

After this episode, there followed for Jeanne du Barry the ominous calm that sometimes enters the lives of people at a point between two storms. She had now outlived the poignant sorrow of her dismissal from Versailles—the tragedy that was to end her life was yet to come. In this short breathing-space afforded by the chances of her existence she was happy enough. All sorts and conditions of interesting people came to Luciennes to look upon the favourite of a dead King.

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The early months of Revolution left Jeanne untouched. Perhaps she felt safe enough in the knowledge that although she had been the companion of Royalty, she herself held a sufficiently plebeian record. Her sense of security was, of course, misplaced. For after the chief offenders against democracy had been impugned and destroyed, there arose a hatred of those who had been directly or indirectly associated with the hated régime.

Now had Jeanne been a callous courtesan—true to type—all might have been well with her. But let it be said without hesitation that there was nothing of the courtesan in this woman save her body. Her brain, her spirit, were untouched by the trade of the trafficker in love. Loyal to those who had befriended her, she now proclaimed her loyalty, risking death by the proclamation. She might have gone to England and found a safe haven there, she might



have dallied with the new powers, and by exercising the courtesan's gift, have won safety and money. She did none of these things. On the contrary, she openly displayed an attachment to the Royal house, and wrote to Marie Antoinette a letter offering that unhappy Queen all that she possessed.

"Luciennes and its contents are yours, Madame," wrote this loyal lover. "Was it not your kindness that gave it back to me? All that I own comes to me from your family, and I am too full of gratitude to forget it. The late King made me a thousand precious gifts before sending me away. I have had the honour of making an inventory of these gifts, and I offer them willingly to you, Madame, who have so many expenses to bear. Allow me, I beg, to return to Cæsar that which belongs to Cæsar."

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She was planning her own tragedy, but she did not know it. An inexpressibly rash act that followed was her liaison with the Duc de Brissac. She had known him in former times, and this man, an intimate of Royalty, a Governor at one period of Paris, had excited the hatred of the revolutionary leaders. The love affair itself was a gracious thing. The Duke gave her the love that a man gives to his wife. It was no mean, no cold-blooded business. It was a passionate drama—a fitting prelude to the tragedy which it helped to hasten—with emotion wrought up to white-heat.

Luciennes was now watched by spies. The unpopularity of De Brissac reacted on Jeanne. Here was a woman openly living with a man who was an avowed opponent of the new régime. However, even this rash attachment



might not have been fatal had Jeanne exercised more tactfulness in connection with an episode that occurred on the night of the 10th January, 1791.

On that night the house at Luciennes was broken into by thieves. A large quantity of property was stolen. With mad impetuosity, Jeanne actually advertised her loss on every hoarding in Paris. Hungry-eyed *sans-culottes* passing to taverns and theatres, paused to read the printed descriptions of priceless jewels, bronzes, marbles, and a hundred other precious things. It is possible that these advertisements formed the texts of fifty street-corner sermons.

Eventually the thieves were arrested in England. Madame Du Barry paid four visits to that country, ostensibly to raise money on her jewels. Her genuine motive, however, if we may believe certain chroniclers, was to raise sympathy in England for the Royalist cause. During her visits she made many friends in this country. London society welcomed Jeanne. She was presented to George III.

Madame Du Barry was in London in that January of 1793 when the news arrived that the King had been executed. She was overcome with grief, and went into deep mourning, and attended various services held in the city for the soul of the "Martyr." On the day following the execution of Louis XVI, all Europe rose in arms. On February 1st, France declared war on England. Jeanne, disregarding the advice of Pitt, who begged her to remain in this country, went back to France. Spies had watched her whilst she was in London—had, of course, noted her mourning, her publicly-vaunted sympathy with the dethroned house. They brought their tales (probably much embellished) to the right quarter.

Returning to Luciennes, she found to her amazement

that seals had been placed upon the house. These were presently removed, but from that moment she began to realize that she was in serious peril. Moreover, her servants, probably fearing for their own safety, were now turning against the unhappy woman. They aided the spies. Salenave, a butler, dismissed for theft, was now a member of the Revolutionary Council of Versailles. This enterprising person, aided by another discharged servant, drew up a list of the people in the district whose arrest the public safety demanded. Madame Du Barry headed the list.

The first arrest proved abortive. A petition for her freedom was drawn up and signed by many of the most important inhabitants of the district, and after certain delays she was liberated. However, on September 22nd, 1793, Jeanne was re-arrested and taken to the House of Detention at Sainte Pelagie. She had been stripped of all her property—even her personal belongings had been taken. Indeed, she was so poor that she was forced to borrow a few francs from friends to buy food in prison.

Nevertheless, her optimism never flagged. She now felt certain that her property would be forfeited, but she believed that her life was not in danger. Nor did her sanguineness fail when she was transferred from the temporary prison to the terrible gaol of the Conciergerie. Few prisoners of the Terror ever left that building except to die. At the Conciergerie, she occupied the room that had seen the last despairs of poor Marie Antoinette.

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The trial of Jeanne du Barry began at nine o'clock on the morning of December 6th. Beside her were the



Vandenyver family—the father and two sons. The Vandenyvers had been her bankers—they were included in the indictment with herself.

The indictment against Jeanne—a long-winded affair—contained fourteen distinct charges. Reduced to essentials, it claimed that Du Barry, aided by the Vandenyvers, had assisted the enemies of the Revolution with money and with other gifts ; that instead of placing her many treasures at the disposal of the authorities, she had secreted them, and had, moreover, arranged for a sham robbery, and that she, aided by the bankers, had aided and abetted the agents of a counter-Revolution in London. It was alleged, too, that many anti-Revolutionary papers had been found by spies at the house at Luciennes.

That Jeanne had openly supported the Royalist cause we know ; that she had actively carried on the work suggested by her enemies, is possible, but there is no positive evidence of such action.

The witnesses were all of them of the baser sort. There was Grieve, the leader of the cabal against Du Barry, and a low-down person called Bernard D'Escourt, who admitted that he had acted as intermediary. The thieving Salenave, still smarting from his dismissal, gave evidence, and although we may charitably hold the view that there was a touch of truth therein, it is possible that many of his statements were deliberate inventions. Even her black servant, Zamore, whom she had petted and spoiled, now came forward to denounce his mistress, hoping, perhaps, to win money and some kind of favour.

The trial dragged its slow length along. Like many of the trials of that régime, it was a solemn farce, with all sorts of pedantic and legal formalities thrust forward to support the fabric of treachery and lies. On the second



day, after the defence of the prisoners had been put forward and heard partly with cynical amusement—partly with furious interruptions—the President summed up. His summing-up was, of course, a mere case for the prosecution—a case that had been vindictively and brutally outlined by the notorious Fouquier-Tinville.

Calling Jeanne by the name of “Courtesan,” the President in rhetorical terms declared that she was a friend and intimate of Pitt—the enemy of France—that she had aided the rising in La Vendée—that she had been a mistress of De Brissac who had himself suffered the just punishment of the Revolutionary tribunal. There was no weighing of evidence—no balance of the possibilities of guilt or innocence. The poorest English Justice of the Peace (a figure of fun for all humorists) would have hesitated before committing this horrible travesty of fair-play, but it satisfied a tribunal that loved to make a solemn pretence of justice, taking care, however, to settle its verdicts before the trial began.

After the President had summed up with similar bias concerning the Vandenyvers, the jury went out to consider their verdict. To sustain the farce of “justice,” they remained absent for an hour and a quarter. Eventually they returned a verdict of “Guilty” against the four prisoners, who were then sentenced to die within the space of twenty-four hours.

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After the sentence Jeanne seemed quite calm. Perhaps the shock had drugged her—she showed no signs of distress. But when the time came for the execution, there was a change. The poor creature was seized with

panic. She raved, shook, cried, moaned. She had never thought about death, and now it was coming down upon her, unprepared by philosophy, religion, or meditation.

Life ! She craved for life, if it were only an extension of a few weeks—a few days. With the passionate frenzy of a thing that sees itself trapped, she sent for the Governor of the prison, and flinging herself at his feet, foamed forth wild bribes. She would reveal her secret hiding-places—would tell him where she had concealed many treasures. Then, her memory suddenly made marvellously accurate by fear, she actually recited in detail the names of the priceless things she had hidden, with an exact naming of the hiding-places. A gold service, a jewelled casket, a diamond chain, a ring, a collection of crested gold plate, Turkish daggers : all these articles the wretched creature enumerated, hoping that the revelation would save her life. She had forgotten that the property of the victims of the Revolution automatically fell into the hands of that theoretically altruistic, but practically greedy-handed set of rogues, adventurers and doctrinaires.

They told her roughly that it was useless—this appeal—that if bribes of ten times the value had been offered, the impartial justice of the Court would be carried into effect. Then she collapsed, and they had to carry her to the tumbril that was to take her to the guillotine.

Others who went to the guillotine on that day, and indeed on all the days of wholesale slaughter, possessed an ideal to uphold their courage. For Jeanne there was none. She was no noble, dying for a cause that was already dead. Herself belonged to the people—to those who were about to kill her. The cart rumbled over the cobbled streets on that cold Sunday afternoon, whilst she sat, huddled in a corner of it, too terrified even to feel



cold. Her friends, the Vandenyvers, tried to console her. She looked at them with unseeing eyes, her lips moving without speech.

The tumbril halted for a moment near the Palais Royal. On the balcony of that millinery shop where thirty years ago she had worked, an irresponsible, joyous creature, Jeanne now saw a crowd of young assistants, waiting to see the tumbrils pass. She took no heed—did not seem to recognize this sudden merging of past and present. For her there was now no past, no present, nothing but an all-covering fear.

At half-past four she was carried up the steps of the scaffold. To the last moment she was crying "Help! Help!" as a woman cries who is attacked by thieves. Her companions, the Vandenyvers, died with the calmness of business men performing a business transaction.

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A Frenchman who had known Jeanne du Barry throughout her career, who saw the end of it, wrote of her these words :

" The most important events that happened during her time at Court made no more impression upon her than images thrown on a screen by a magic lantern. She had taken no part in them, and they left only the vaguest—the feeblest recollection. She was a good woman, always. After the Revolution she showed great generosity to those who might have become its victims. Finally, this woman, whom none had protected from vice in youth—who had indeed been led away by poverty and evil advice—had never at any time done any person an injury, even when she had unlimited power to inflict it. . . ."



A good epitaph this, and a good summing-up of the character of Jeanne. It is possible that history would have had little to say about this woman but for two things—her illimitable extravagance and the circumstances of her end. Had Jeanne du Barry spent money merely as other women of her kind spent it; had she finished her life in a “Maison de tolerance,” or convent, then one imagines that half a dozen lines in an encyclopædia would have covered her record. For indeed she did little to interest the historian who deals with events and not with emotions. The interest that still attaches to her career, nearly 150 years after her passage, would seem to suggest that the most commonplace sinner may secure a place in history if she spend sufficient money and die a sufficiently sensational death!

# Christian VII of Denmark and his Queen

(1749-1808)

ONE hundred and fifty years ago, Denmark, now perhaps one of the most democratic nations, was practically, if not theoretically, an absolute monarchy. Nevertheless, this absolutism had not pressed heavily upon the people, for the rulers, though frequently men of poor character, had been tolerant and fair-minded. The Court was German rather than Scandinavian—German was spoken there—German etiquette was observed.

It was a time of immorality in all the Courts of Europe. France at the moment when Christian was born set a fashion ; the other nations limped after it, less gracefully, but with equal zest. The welfare of the people was subordinated to gross extravagance—to love of pomp. Snobbishness and the desire to shine obsessed the ruling classes.

The heredity of Christian was bad. His father, Frederick V, was a debauchee—loving to frequent the lowest places of his city in company with drinkers and coarse women. Of this father, and a mother who was a good, but fatuous woman, Louise, a daughter of George II of England, he was born on the 29th January, 1749.

Three years later, Louise died. Frederick, having exhibited a superficial grief, married six months afterwards the Princess Juliana Maria of Brunswick-Wolfenbittel. Christian, ignored by father and by stepmother, was left to mature among tutors, valets, and pages.

His education was elaborate and very brutal. The tutors were directed by a sort of overseer, Ditlev Reventlow, a nobleman of a peculiarly harsh nature, impelled perhaps by Sadistic tendencies. The early life of Christian was a



CHRISTIAN VII.  
King of Denmark.





record of punishments, wherein flogging played the chief part. Reventlow's brutality was reinforced by the harshness of a Lutheran pastor—another preceptor—whose habit was to thrash the boy mercilessly if he failed to repeat the substance of dreary and long-winded sermons. There is small doubt that this cruelty of the early days stripped the boy of courage, and set up what would be called to-day "inferiority complex," that at a later time led to terrible consequences.

The teacher beat him—the valets and the pages demoralized him. They taught him sinister vices—vices that probably took a firmer hold because all manliness had been beaten out of his body. When, subsequently, a more tolerant system of education was set up, the harm had been done. It may be said of this poor marionette of a King that life never gave him a chance. . . . Only a miracle could have saved him from the effects of bad heredity, a bad education, a horrible entourage !

The love of display that was so prominent a characteristic of the Court, caused the King to insist upon the youth exhibiting his supposed classicism and mathematical knowledge to the public ear. To that end, young Christian was compelled from time to time to undergo a sort of public examination in many branches of learning. At those examinations he delighted the people by his ready response. Their delight might have been less had they known that the whole business had been deliberately rehearsed—and that Christian had learned parrot-like the questions and the answers ! The nation now looked forward to being governed by the wisest of monarchs. Here, they reflected, was a Prince who was a mingling of philosophy, logic, religion, everything that went to the making of the perfect ruler. . . .

It is possible that experiences of this kind strengthened in Christian the mummer-like tendencies that already existed in his soul. He was an excellent actor—loved mimicry—and enjoyed what children call “dressing-up.” Deceit came to him with such ease that he loved it for its own sake. He could be witty at times. Once when remonstrated with for telling a lie, he pointed out that a certain philosopher had postulated twelve kinds of truth. “As it is too tiresome to differentiate,” said Christian, “let us avoid all bother by not telling the truth at all !”

His vanity was intense. Although very small, almost a dwarf, he was attractive in an effeminate, pretty way, and would stand for hours at his mirror, twisting his tiny body into dozens of attitudes. Perfumes, cosmetics, clothes, formed his chief interests. Frequently he said that he hated the idea of kingship—would prefer to be an actor. “Nero,” he remarked, “had never been greater than when he sang at the burning of Rome !” For that Imperial buffoon, Christian often expressed huge admiration.

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On the 13th January, 1766, Frederick died. Christian was immediately proclaimed King, but few duties were thrust upon him. He knew nothing of government—his teachers had been instructed by those powerful ministers, Moltke, Bernstorff and Reventlow, to instil a good quantity of Plato and mathematics, but to ignore history and politics. Christian came to his throne as ignorant of the duties of kingship as the poorest roadmender.

They gave him, of course, a number of trivial things to do—things that were mere matters of form and left vital issues untouched. In order to bore him effectually



with Royal duties, the ministers forced him to take part in dreary ceremonies. The manœuvre succeeded. Christian soon grew sick of the whole business, left everything to his ministers, and began to divert himself in his own way.

The "inferiority complex" developed in childhood now twisted itself round and took the form of a love of humiliating other people. Christian took delight in horseplay of the most childish and the most offensive kind. He would listen with bowed head and intent eyes to some portentous church dignitary, and, at the end of the adjuration, would thrust a wet mop full in the face of the astonished prelate! He would knock tea-cups out of the hands of women—would take a slimy eel from a dish at the dinner table and slyly introduce it down the back of a prosy statesman, and whilst pretending to stroke affectionately the cheek of some fawning courtier, would impress upon that cheek dabs of ink or soot. Of course, etiquette demanded that these attentions should be received with smiles and bows. It would have been interesting, however, to have heard the private opinions of the victims.

Christian exhibited his admiration of Nero by a certain copying of that ruler's night orgies. He would go forth at night with half a dozen companions of his own age—assault passengers—knock down watchmen. Sometimes he was arrested by these officers, who, of course, were not aware of his identity. It must be said to the credit of Christian that he never resented these arrests, and indeed was enormously amused by the horror and astonishment of the watchmen when they learned the facts of the case.

The nation wished him to marry. Christian, so far, had shown no liking for women—he still continued to indulge himself in unnatural vices. Kirchoff, the valet,

who had been his chief demoralizer, had been dismissed ; but other lackeys remained to encourage the wretched boy in his unhappy tendencies.

Eventually a marriage was arranged. Matilda Caroline, a sister of George III of England, was chosen, and Christian expressed himself as ready to marry this lady as any other person. So irresponsible, so childish was this marionette King that he could not bring himself to take marriage or indeed any important matter with seriousness. However, he was not able to summon sufficient energy to resist the importunities of those who urged him towards marriage. Taking the line of least resistance, he now consented to the union with Matilda.

George III was not pleased. That respectable, if somewhat dull monarch, was doubtless a sufficiently good judge of men to realize that Christian was not likely to make an ideal husband. However, the match was quite a good one from the point of view of diplomacy. Eventually, George compromised, and agreed to the union on condition that it should be postponed for at least two years, for his sister, at that time, was a schoolgirl of thirteen.

Two years later, amid great pomp, with a proxy standing for the King of Denmark, Matilda was married at the Chapel of St. James's Palace. The British Government voted a marriage portion of £100,000 to the new Queen of Denmark. On her arrival in that country, a second marriage took place. The people received her with enthusiasm—everybody was enchanted with her youth and gentle prettiness.

In the beginning, Christian appears to have been under the influence of this enchantment, but perhaps his satisfaction was due to a certain love of novelty. To have a wife was a new and amusing experience—but it is pos-









sible that a new mechanical toy would have given him equal pleasure. Very soon he grew tired of his wife, and Matilda, for her part, cared little for Christian. He was too small—too effeminate. She adored strength, height, domination. The child-like gambols of Christian at first amused her, and finally disgusted her. Madame Von Plessen, her chief lady-in-waiting, who heartily disliked the King, helped to foster this emotion. The King returned the dislike, and frequently played brutal jokes upon the lady.

Madame Von Plessen used many artifices to keep the King and Queen apart. Christian, now deprived of his wife, began to drink very heavily. Moreover, he who had in former days cared little for women, now sought out feminine companions. But not at Court. There was some twist in the man's composition that invariably bade him seek the gutter. In the slums and taverns of Copenhagen; in dark alleys and in queer streets where queer lights twinkled, he found his solaces and his loves. Unashamed, knowing that at any moment his identity might be recognized, he would actually frequent the vilest houses, mingling his Royalty with soldiers, sailors, commercial travellers, and all the picaresque floatings of a seaport town.

It was whilst Christian was engaged in one of these expeditions that he formed an insane passion for a young woman known to the people of her entourage as "Stovlet Catherine." They called her by this name ("Catherine of the Gaiters"), because of her passion for wearing men's clothes.

She was something of an Amazon, this Catherine, with her tall, abundant figure, her firm chin, her long legs, and her gracious torso. She walked like a man, with long

strides, and used men's oaths. Christian was so obsessed by this girl that he became partially a slave. He would involve himself in all sorts of complications to avenge her private injuries—he was ready to pardon criminals in whom she chanced to be interested. He contrasted his meek little wife with this tempestuous beauty, and began to hate Matilda with the hatred of a weak little egotist, who can be strong only in vindictiveness and spite.

He took Catherine to the palace, made her sit with him at State banquets, petted her under the eyes of his wife, and fondled her on his knee, forgetting that he was making himself ridiculous as well as odious, for the sight of a dwarfish youth enfolding on his lap a vigorous young woman, several sizes bigger than himself, could hardly have been a picturesque thing. He delighted Catherine by giving her a title of nobility, and promised that he would stand by her, in spite of the opposition of wife and Court and people.

The King made no change in his heartless behaviour when a child was born to his wife. The Queen at this time was in a very unhappy condition. She had lost her friend Madame Von Plessen, who had been abruptly exiled at the instance of certain persons whom she had annoyed. The birth of the infant gave her no satisfaction. She was listless and bare of interest in life. Meantime, "Catherine of the Gaiters" continued to exhibit herself at the palace, looking forward to the time when she would become a power in the land and, perhaps, rise to the heights of a shoddy Pompadour. This ambition, however, was speedily killed. For Bernstorff and his colleagues, probably themselves fearing what Catherine hoped, frightened Christian into a summary dismissal of his favourite. They came to him with terrifying stories



of an enraged populace, ready to plunge into revolution if the affair continued. Christian, always lazy and pliant, agreed to her "congé." Catherine was packed off to Hamburg with a very liberal allowance, and Christian never saw her again. He cried when she went, and for some time moped. His advisers seized upon his unhappy condition as a pretext for urging him to travel. Although Christian took no active part in government, they probably feared that at any moment some caprice might cause him to interfere with their arrangements.

Christian was delighted. He loved travel—loved the excitement of seeing new places. With a suite of fifty people that gathered accretions as it went, he strutted through many cities of Europe. In Altona he made the acquaintance of Dr. Johann Struensee, to whom he took an instant liking, appointing him travelling physician. This man, so lightly picked up, perhaps as mere diversion—perhaps to cure some temporary ache—proved at a later time a disintegrating force that came near to plunging Denmark into revolution.

Christian came to England. George was by no means anxious to greet his disreputable young brother-in-law, but made the best of a bad bargain by inviting the King of Denmark and his suite to lodge at St. James's whilst he himself fled to Richmond, where he remained, rather sulkily, throughout the visit.

London was delighted with Christian. There was, perhaps, a certain specious fascination about this light-footed, light-hearted marionette of a king who danced his way through life; a child that never grew up. . . . Perhaps, too, the extravagance of his expenditure dazzled the Londoners, who to this hour adore ceremonials and the pomp of power. (The crowds on Lord Mayor's

Day in the City seem to point to a survival of this love.)

Women adored the tiny king ! He became a pet—pet names were given him. Crowds waited all night and all day to see him pass. He postured, grimaced, smiled, enjoying all the incense and the applause like the mummer that he was. He scattered gifts everywhere—sometimes pouring out handfuls of gold from the balcony of the palace to be scrambled for by the people. His expenses in London were said to be £2000 a day !

But even here, whilst revelling in the raptures of his reception, he could not abandon his love of sordid debauchery. Often he would steal away from an entertainment in St. James's to seek another sort of entertainment in St. Giles's or Wapping. Among thieves, bullies, tramps, and their women, he would play pranks of the sort he had played in Copenhagen.

Oxford made him a Doctor of Common Law. Struensee, who by this time was in great favour with the King, shared the honour. The climax of Christian's triumphs in England arrived when the Lord Mayor of London gave him a State voyage on a Thames barge. Finally, King George, who had remained aloof except when compelled by hard etiquette to receive him, and now cheered by the prospect of his early departure, invited him to a farewell banquet at Richmond.

Christian left London on October 12th, wafted on his way by the grateful blessings of well-tipped lackeys and gorgeously paid courtesans. He was enchanted with his experiences, and spoke of his visit to England as the happiest time of his life.

In Paris, he repeated his success. Louis XV fell upon his neck, paying him absurd compliments. The French



Academy, mindful of Oxford, made him a member of that exclusive body, pouring on him compliments that would have been exaggerated if bestowed upon a Newton or a Descartes.

A long tour had been planned for Christian, but after Paris, he suddenly grew weary. Already he was degenerating very swiftly in mind and body. Prejudiced by an evil heredity, educated by blows and bullyings, demoralized by valets and lackeys, he could not hold out against a premature decay of his faculties. Already the wretched young man was beginning to do strange things without any knowledge that he was doing them. He would go for a walk, and forget where he was going. He would begin a sentence, and trail off into some bypath that had no association with the original words.

On his return to Denmark, the early vices, which his marriage had to a very large extent eradicated, came back with force. He now conceived a hatred of women. He had long since abandoned marital relations with his wife, to whom he was now entirely indifferent. A show of friendship was maintained for the sake of the child. Matilda on her part had begun by despising the King—she was now at the point when she came near to hating him.

It was at this point, when the palace held a King and Queen who regarded each other as enemies, that Struensee, who had been appointed resident physician at the Court, conceived the idea of gaining a certain ascendancy—an ascendancy which as we shall see presently dominated the whole nation.

Struensee has been compared by superficial critics with Gregory Rasputin, but although both these adventurers achieved a certain result, extraordinary, sensational, the



resemblance ends at that point. Rasputin, all his life, was an obscene peasant—claiming divine powers—a charlatan who owned, perhaps, merely a hypnotic gift. Struensee, on the other hand, was a man of culture—of wide knowledge—of dynamic brain—a man who laid no claim to divine assistance, but prided himself on his hard materialism.

Struensee at this time was thirty-two years old—handsome, tall, well-mannered, a brilliant talker, an instinctive diplomat. The Queen, forgotten by her husband, unhappy, bored by the routine of a Court that was very German in its prosy pedantry of etiquette, turned towards Struensee immediately as a refuge from the misery of life. He set himself to fascinate her, and succeeded.

He had now a valuable ally in Matilda. He found another in his old friend Shack-Carl, Count of Rantzau-Ascheberg, who had come to Denmark after leaving Russia, where he had incurred the hatred of Catherine. Rantzau, now a middle-aged man, had had a highly adventurous career. He had been actor, monk, singer, swindler. Struensee, who was no lover of Russia because his abnormal vanity had been wounded by a slight put upon him by a high official of that country, now decided to avail himself of the assistance of Rantzau to weaken Russian influence in Denmark. A second ally of Struensee was Envold Brandt, who at one time had been a companion of Christian on many of his night expeditions.

Struensee had perceived that there were two opposing factions at the Court. The Holck and Bernstorff party stood by the King. The Queen-Dowager, with certain officials who were keen reactionaries, hating certain innovations that had been introduced since the accession of Christian, formed the opposition.

Struensee, moving swiftly, silently, towards his objective—the securing of absolute power—soon exchanged the humble rôle of physician for the rôle of confidential friend to Christian. He ate at the Royal table—he spoke to the King as one speaks to a tavern acquaintance. At the same time, he showed such attentions to Matilda that gossip speedily assumed a certain relationship.

The rise of Struensee was, perhaps, swifter than even the rise of Rasputin. That plausible charlatan did not consolidate his position at the Palace of Tsarskoe-Selo until several years after the working of his first alleged “Miracle.” Struensee, in a few months, broke down powerful traditions—and swept the Court of established Ministers.

In Bernstorff—the faithful, intelligent Bernstorff, the acute Struensee saw at once a powerful enemy. He decided that Bernstorff must go. Christian, now entirely under the domination of the German doctor, called upon his old servant to resign.

(The situation created by Johann Struensee has been crudely presented in the preceding pages, but it is neither possible nor desirable in a brief study of this kind to deal in detail with the political aspects, domestic and international, of the Danish Court. One is dealing with the wretched King and Queen as a man and woman who by means of a heartless adventurer were propelled upon a certain course. The political events are recorded crudely, and only when they bear intimately upon the destinies of both.)

Having disposed of Bernstorff, the next move of Struensee was to prevail upon Christian to abandon personal audiences of important personages and to substitute written communications. The King was more than ready to do this—he hated the boring business and was glad to



dispense with it. Struensee pointed out to his dupe that much valuable time was wasted by personal audiences—that the new method would give the monarch larger opportunities for amusement and dissipation. In the beginning, Struensee had played a worthy part by weaning Christian from many practices that were injuring his health. Having gained his confidence by this behaviour, he now incontinently went back on his own counsel, and to serve his specious ends, actually encouraged the unfortunate semi-imbecile to seek further self-indulgence.

Meantime, Struensee had formed a very close alliance with the Queen—an alliance that was not wholly political. Matilda was now the virtual ruler of Denmark—Struensee dictated, and she obeyed him without question.

It must be said in favour of the man that when power came to him he used it to good ends. He suddenly developed a mania for reforms. But he was a German—he did not understand the temperament nor the needs of the Danish people. Thus did it come about that his good works, so far from rousing admiration and gratitude, earned him the hatred of the nation.

The Queen was now dominated by Struensee, whom she had come to love passionately. For her there was every excuse. The exigencies of a diplomatic marriage had forced her into a union with an effeminate puppet for whom she could never have held affection or esteem. Struensee seemed to her everything that a man should be. She now gave herself to unrestrained passion. Neither her lover nor herself went to any pains to conceal their liaison. Christian himself connived at it, glad to be rid of a woman who had been little more than a temporary diversion—a new amusement.

In July 1771, a girl was born to Matilda. There was



no enthusiasm in the nation. Struensee was said to be the father of the child. Christian was more amused than enraged when the rumours came to his hearing. His old vices now held him fast—he was in that state of self-centralization when a man can be agitated about nothing except the thing that interferes with his indulgence.

The resentment of the nation deepened. The King was now a figurehead—they hardly thought about him. The limelight fell upon the two lovers. The people were horrified, not so much by the immorality of the proceeding, as by the fact that this woman of Royal blood should give her kisses to a foreign adventurer of low birth.

Struensee, unmoved by the hatred, went his way towards further insolence and power. If one may use a vulgar phrase that expressly denotes the situation—the man had “run past himself.” So obsessed was he with his confidence of power that he now looked forward to the time when Christian would be deposed—when he (Struensee) would marry the Queen and reign as Regent of Denmark !

The climax of his mad race arrived when he compelled the King to issue a decree that every order, every State document signed by Struensee would carry the weight of a document signed by Christian himself. How he secured this concession one can merely conjecture. It may have been gained easily enough at a moment when the King in a lazy mood was glad to be rid of all responsibility—or, perhaps, Struensee, aided by Brandt, who bullied the King and sometimes used bodily violence to his person, may have frightened the wretched little monarch into submission.

Struensee now ruled Denmark with the rule of a tyrant.

Nothing could be effected without his permission. From the most important international problem down to the trivial question of Court upholstery, his word was the word that must be obeyed. In the meantime, Christian was kept in semi-confinement by Brandt, who, under a pretence of guarding his health, saw to it that the King did nothing that might weaken in the smallest degree the influence of Struensee.

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But already the end of this extraordinary adventure was in sight. The Queen-Dowager, who had been living in retirement outside Copenhagen in company with her son Frederick, now formed a sort of cabal, with the object of bringing about the arrest and condemnation of Struensee, Brandt, and the young Queen herself.

A "Palace Revolution" was planned. Simplicity was the keynote of the conspiracy. There was to be no general rousing of the nation—the business was to be put upon the basis of a mere commonplace adjustment of affairs.

Rantzau, that facile and dishonest personage, formed one of the conspirators. Previously he had quarrelled with Struensee concerning money matters, and was ready to betray the man on whom he had fawned. Moreover, he perceived with his usual acuteness that the reign of the German doctor could not continue for any length of time, and on the Pickwickian principle of "shouting with the largest mob," he decided to join his fortunes with the Queen-Dowager's party.

On the night of January 16th, 1772, there was a ball at the palace. Struensee, wearing an elaborate Court dress (he loved show and colours), was in excellent spirits.



All seemed going well with him—he did not for an instant suspect how near he was to his fall.

The ball ended in the early hours of morning and Struensee went to his apartments in the palace. At the same time a band of seven people, consisting of the Queen-Dowager, her son Frederick, Rantzau, and certain army officers (seven in all), went straight to the bedroom of Christian.

He was asleep. When he woke and saw the little crowd in the room, he screamed with fright. Had they come to murder him? His screams tore through the palace. Rantzau after some difficulty succeeded in calming the poor imbecile. They had not come to injure him, he explained—they merely desired him to sign certain papers.

Now, there was a kind of childish ingenuousness in Christian that caused him to enjoy putting his signature to documents, if the reading of them did not give him labour. Immediately he became calm. Rantzau then told him that a revolution might come at any moment if three persons were not placed under immediate arrest. He proceeded to show the warrants to Christian, who was ready to sign the documents for the arrest of Struensee and Brandt, but held back from the arrest of his wife.

Rantzau was ready for this remonstrance. The Queen, he pointed out, was occasioning a resentment in the nation equal to, if not exceeding, the resentment occasioned by her paramour. If Struensee and Brandt were impeached whilst the Queen was allowed to remain untouched, the chances of revolution would remain firm. This argument succeeded. Christian signed the three warrants, and the conspirators then left his room, having, however, first of all secured his signature to other documents of even



higher importance. Those documents appointed Eichstadt (one of the conspirators) Commander-in-Chief of the Army—and bestowed upon him and Koller (another officer) full powers to act “in the interests of the State.” In plain words, the conspirators were now the actual rulers of Denmark !

No time was lost. They went at once to the apartments of Struensee, and arrested him, still wearing his gay ballroom clothes. The arrest of Brandt followed a few hours later.

The taking of the young Queen was a more complicated business. Both men had accepted their rough handlings with the calmness of adventurers who are always ready for a sharp turn of the wheel of fortune. Matilda, horrified, amazed, made a desperate fight.

Rantzau, with his characteristic brutality, had forced his way into her room whilst she was half undressed. When the warrant was shown to her, she flew to the window and tried to fling herself into the courtyard. The soldiers were summoned to seize her ; in the struggle that followed, all her clothing was torn off and she was in a state of nudity ! They flung some wraps upon her, and hurried her away in a coach to the fortress of Kronborg.

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The conspiracy had succeeded. Conceived on simple lines, it triumphed where a more complicated and sensational “coup” might have failed and have brought much bloodshed. Immediately after the event, the Council of State was revived. Rantzau was made a General. His enormous private debts were paid by the nation, the Queen-Dowager regarding him, perhaps, as

the central figure in the deliverance of Denmark from an adventurer autocrat.

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The trial of the three accused persons, Struensee, Brandt, and the young Queen, was conducted with pomp, hypocrisy, and a travesty of justice that would have been laughable had not such serious issues been involved. Judicial procedure in Denmark in the eighteenth century was to some extent on the lines of a comic-opera jurisprudence. Prisoners were prejudged before the proceedings began. It was a frequent practice to exclude everything that might be said in their defence and to magnify or twist everything that was in their despite.

In a State trial of the kind which we are now describing, these tendencies were, of course, exaggerated. A pick-pocket or a street assassin would have had a fairer trial.

Struensee was charged on various indictments. The chief indictments were that he had been guilty of usurping Royal power—stealing public moneys—ill-treating the King, and carrying on an adulterous association with the Queen. Brandt was accused of conniving at the adultery—of robbing the Treasury—of assaulting the person of Christian whilst engaged in guarding his health. The Queen was arraigned on the charge of adultery alone. Matilda was not present at the trial.

After a long-winded ceremonial wherein many witnesses gave evidence, chiefly pointing to the acts of adultery, the three accused were found guilty. Matilda was ordered to be imprisoned in a fortress. Struensee and his companion were to be beheaded, and their right hands were to be struck off !



Immediately after the promulgation of the sentences, Struensee and Brandt petitioned the King for mitigation of their punishments. Christian refused without hesitation to consider the petition of Brandt, who had undoubtedly showed him personal cruelty. Struensee, however, had been his friend—had for a time done much to fortify his health. He was on the point of reducing the sentence, but the new Ministers intervened. Brandt they might have forgiven—Struensee was too powerful a person to remain among the living. Terrifying Christian with the possibility of the German escaping and again invading his power, they eventually prevailed upon the half-imbecile King to sign the death-warrant of each man.

One need not linger on what followed. Brandt suffered first. Struensee was forced to stand for half an hour and see the agony of his friend. When his own time came, he was seized with terror—had to be forced down upon the block whilst his hand was severed and his head struck off. The executions were carried out with the brutality characteristic of the age.

\* \* \*

Caroline Matilda had been sentenced to a life imprisonment in the dismal fortress of Aalborg, but to that place she never travelled. The British Government intervened. George, though by no means fond of his sister and horrified by the scandal, was not ready to contemplate her shutting-up at Aalborg. Through Keith, the British Ambassador at Copenhagen, he sent a strong remonstrance to the new Government. The latter refused to be shaken. Matilda, they pointed out, had been tried by a properly constituted Court and must suffer the judgment. To this



announcement England replied in characteristic fashion. Denmark was solemnly warned that unless the Queen were handed over to the British envoy, to be protected by Britain and at the same time held from further participation in Danish affairs, war would immediately be declared. The threat was confirmed by certain naval preparations.

That was enough ! There was a hasty Council ; presently Keith was able to inform his Government that its demands would be accepted. The question now arose—where was the young Queen to go ?

Queen Charlotte, that entirely respectable personage, would not receive her at St. James's. Nobody was anxious to welcome a young woman who had broken the " eleventh commandment." Eventually, it was decided that she should go to Zell, in Hanover, a sleepy little town, where she might maintain a condition of semi-state.

And so to Zell she went. Already Struensee was fading from her thoughts—actively devoted, no doubt, to her own fate. It is possible, moreover, that for him she had never experienced a sincere affection, but merely a passion that died when its inspirer was no longer beside her to stimulate its workings. Her chief anguish was now in connection with her young child. She was not permitted to take the little girl with her to Zell. The little Princess Louise Augusta was given to the charge of a woman of the Court.

On the 1st June, 1772, Matilda said good-bye to the country where she had played so poor a part. For five hours she had delayed her going, refusing to leave the child. At length, sobbing, she made her farewells to the many persons whom she had come to know during her imprisonment at Kronborg. Her last act was to distribute money among the poorer prisoners in that gloomy place.

A British gunboat took her to Germany, and that was the end of her as far as Denmark was concerned.

In Zell, the deposed Queen, now divorced from her husband, lived very quietly and (it is said) happily, but one imagines that there could be small happiness for a woman who before the age of thirty had seen too much of the harshness of life. She took a measure of interest in the happenings of the dull little town, displaying great affection for children, sometimes crying when she spoke of her own child whom she was never to see again. Of Christian she rarely spoke, nor did he speak of her.

And so for three years. At the end of that time, an attempt was made by a small party headed by a young Englishman named Wraxall, to restore her to the throne. The attempt, gallant, unselfish, might or might not have succeeded if Matilda had lived. Before success could come within greeting distance, she had passed from a world that had given her small recompense for the hard task of living, dying at Zell on the 10th of May, 1775, when she was twenty-four years of age.

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After the palace revolution and the deaths of Struensee and Brandt, Denmark had been governed by Cabinet orders. Guldberg, the minister and nominally the King's secretary, was the dominant spirit of the Cabinet. In 1784, the young Crown Prince became Regent, succeeding to the throne on the death of his father. Heredity in the case of Frederick did not assert itself. His long reign was, perhaps, one of the wisest and most beneficial in the history of the country.

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And now—what shall be said of Christian and the long period that still stretched between himself and peace? Little! One does not wish to linger over a record of an imbecile—to write of many things from which the sane mind revolts when it contemplates the saddest spectacle that life can offer.

Let it be said briefly, however, that Christian during those twenty-six years ambled and shuffled through existence, sometimes deliriously joyous—sometimes weighed by melancholy. At times he was a child, playing with toys—at times he was a furious maniac—a maniac who had to be held down by force. Peevish and perverse—at one moment feebly stretching forth puny fists against his attendants—at another moment falling on them with kisses, he paced out his days. When at last death came, it found him with the face of a child, for Time had forgotten him, and had left his features untouched.

Christian died on the 13th March, 1808. Perhaps no more effete King has played a part in the history of a nation. He did nothing! He wrought neither good nor ill. He was a shadow king—a mummer playing with a throne. He is remembered only for his sins and for his follies. When one seeks for a fine deed—an altruistic gesture—one halts at a blank page!



# Edmund Kean

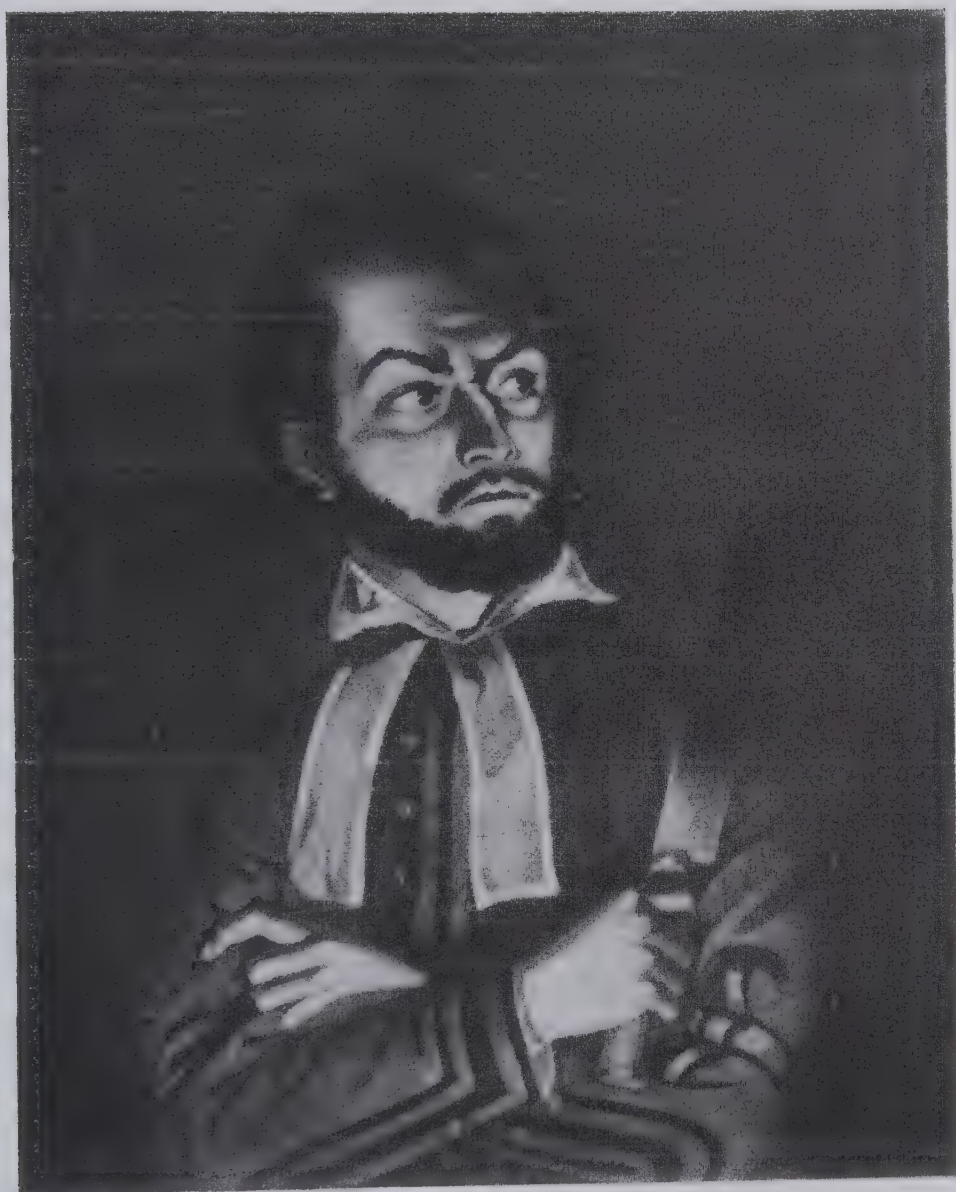
(1787-1833)

OF all the tragedies in which Edmund Kean played, his own life was the supreme tragedy. In that brief life he concentrated the sadness of Hamlet, the jealousy of Othello, the rage of Shylock, the ambition of Macbeth, the madness of Lear. The intensity of his stage existence was but a reflection of the intensity of his existence outside the theatre : he could do nothing half-heartedly, casually. Nature, in fashioning this man might have said : “ I will take a mass of passion and fence it round with just enough flesh to obey the law of gravitation and hold it to earth.” For forty-six years that passion-weighted envelope of flesh moved uneasily through a world that could forgive licence but not passion, and, at the end, he died of despair more surely than he died of the disease that the doctors wrote upon their registers. . . .

\* \* \*

In London in March 1787, Kean was born of a father who was clerk to an architect—of a mother who was a strolling actress. His childhood was gloom and half starvation. Before he was six, he was tumbling for sixpences in circuses. He ran away to sea, became a cabin-boy, sickened of the life, and by a clever feat of acting, escaped the tyranny of a brutal shipmaster by pretending to be deaf and lame.

Then there followed for him the life of the strolling actor. He played in tumble-down halls—in barns. He counted himself lucky if he earned fifteen shillings a week and received food from the admiring audiences. (In those



EDMUND KEAN AS SHYLOCK





days, actors frequently received presents of flesh, fowl, and loaves from pitying patrons.)

His height was against him, and held him back for some time from the playing of important parts, though the height factor was by no means so vital a consideration in the nineteenth century as it is to-day. But so urgent was his genius that he soon broke down this physical drawback, and before he was twenty-one, Kean was actually playing what actors call "leading business," at Belfast.

He must have gained an extraordinary experience. Audiences in the early nineteenth century (and indeed in the later years as well) expected a great deal for their entrance money. The performances sometimes began at half-past six and continued until eleven or a later hour. Kean would appear in tragedy, farce, and pantomime during one evening! Hardly had he recovered from his tremendous death scene in "Othello," when he would bound on the stage with a red wig, and delight the audience in what was called a "roaring farce." And when the farce had finished, there was pantomime, with Kean as clown, stealing sausages! The man could do anything! He thrust as much conviction into the pilfering clown as he thrust into the dying Othello. It was said of him that he could not have acted badly, even if he had tried to act badly!

It was at this time when Edmund was living the half-starved life of the strolling actor that England had one of her periodic outbreaks of enthusiastic insanity. A boy of sixteen called Betty had suddenly burst upon London, playing certain classic rôles which had hitherto been associated with experienced artists. London, although

in those times not stimulated by press agents, waited up all night at the theatre doors to see the precocity of Master Betty. When he went on tour, exactly the same fever infected the cities of the provinces. He was paid an enormous salary—and after disporting himself for a time as the greatest genius of the century, suddenly vanished. Later, becoming fat whilst yet young, he made several futile appearances—and then was forgotten. It was a spasmodic and foolish business. It is probable that Betty was merely a very handsome youth with a certain spurious talent, and that he chanced to appear at a moment when London wanted a new sensation.

Kean was bitterly enraged by this madness for a half-baked boy actor, a madness that allowed himself and other well-tried players to pace out their days and nights to audiences in rat-haunted barns. He said frequently that the injustice of the world was the worst of its hardships—that men could bear any burden if they felt that it was justly imposed. Yet even in those sad days he had intimations of oncoming glory, and refused to be driven from the stage to some more secure calling. “I would rather cut my throat than give up my work,” he is reported to have said when sage friends gave him prosaic counsel.

It was not until Kean had reached the age of twenty-seven that life suddenly showed him a late recognition. He had been on the stage since the age of six, and rejoiced if he went home on Friday night with thirty shillings in his purse. Six years previously he had married Mary Chambers, an actress in the stock company at Waterford, and although she had loyally stood by Edmund, and herself striven to add to the exchequer, they were often without roof or food. It has even been



suggested that their son Charles was born in a hayloft, where they had taken refuge during a storm, because they had no money with which to pay for a lodging.

It was in the wretched little theatre in the market town of Dorchester that Kean at length saw the gleam for which he had waited with so much patience. One night, when the theatre was half empty, and he had played his parts listlessly, he was told that a visitor awaited him in the greenroom. The visitor was Arnold, the Acting Manager of Drury Lane Theatre. He came to Kean with an offer. Dr. Drury, a director of the theatre, had seen the actor perform and wished to secure his services for the national playhouse. Kean instantly remembered with great chagrin that he had engaged himself for a season to Elliston at the Olympic Theatre in London. However, he felt certain that Elliston would release him, and he listened with excitement to the proposal.

"Mr. Kean," said Arnold, "I am empowered to make you two offers. The first is that you come to us for three seasons, receiving eight guineas a week for the first season, nine guineas for the second, and ten for the third. That is a definite proposal. On the other hand, you can if you choose give a number of performances and await results. If you should achieve a success, then you shall make your own terms within reason."

Kean chose the latter course on the understanding, however, that his expenses in London should be paid whilst he was waiting to make his appearance. Arnold, not being aware of the arrangement with Mr. Elliston, agreed to this suggestion, and Kean went home, half insane with excitement.



But a smooth progress was never given to poor Kean. Immediately after his arrival in London, Elliston came down upon him with threats of legal proceedings if he broke his contract to appear at the Olympic Theatre. It must have seemed to Kean an irony of ironies that after so many years of futile strivings for trivial engagements, he was now beset by two important managements—each anxious to secure his services. Meantime, the Drury Lane people announced that his expense allowance would be withdrawn until he had come to an understanding with the Olympic authorities.

Day after day Kean would go down from his lodgings in Cecil Street, Strand, to Drury Lane and hang about the lobby of the great theatre whilst waiting to see Arnold. He was exposed to the sneers of the resident company, who with true professional envy lost no opportunity of trying to discourage an interloper of whose talents they had heard disturbing rumours. "An undersized little rat!" "A half-starved clown!" "A half-breed Jew!" These were some of the comments that came to his too receptive ears. Rae, one of the principal players, passed in, pretending not to see him . . . Munden, the comedian, assuming a friendly manner advised Kean to go "in front, and watch how practised actors played their parts . . ."

He suffered tortures. Many times he contemplated going away and abandoning the possible engagement. Luckily he had a wife who held him back from surrender. She pointed out to him that the very sneers were indeed veiled compliments. "If they are not afraid of you," she told him, "why should they resent your appearing at Drury Lane?"

At length Elliston, with true theatrical inconsistency, compromised. He sent for Kean who was now in a state of semi-despair and said that he would release him from the engagement if he would play for him during the vacation at his theatre at Birmingham. Kean went back to his lodgings in so excited a state that he talked to himself and sang throughout the journey.

\* \* \*

On a gloomy night in January 1814, when frost and snow lay on the streets, Kean, after sitting drearily beside the fire through the wretched afternoon, crept out to go to the theatre, carrying under his arm a parcel that held his costume for the part of "Shylock," in which part he was to make his first appearance. He must have felt very anxious—very miserable. He knew that hostility would be waiting for him on the stage—that the players might perhaps be spiteful enough to try to ruin his performance, providing they could bring about that end without displaying their malice too obviously. A first night is always a horror for an actor—what must that first night have meant for Kean?

The house was half empty. When Kean made his first entrance with "Bassanio," he received no applause. His name was known to some extent in theatrical society, but to the public he was merely an obscure provincial trying his luck in London. The initial scene went tamely. The jealous players watching him from the side of the stage were delighted by this lukewarmness on the part of the audience. They stood at the side, audibly commenting on the little man, sneering at his black wig (the



traditional wig for "Shylock" was red, and the character was played as a comic part). "He will soon be back in his booth!" "Arnold has got hold of a bad bargain!" "What a dwarf he looks!" These were the remarks that were spoken in loud whispers. But Kean heard none of them. No longer was he Edmund Kean—no longer was he on a stage—nor were there envious people at the side—he was the vengeful Jew, and all other things were less than nothing.

The first act—the second act, were played in silence. The audience, depressed by the weather, seemed bored and unresponsive. But when, at length, the third act came, and with it the memorable scene with Tubal—the scene wherein Shylock learns of his daughter's flight with the Christian, then the flood burst and the miracle happened.

Kean had been holding himself in reserve. Now, he let himself go. Suddenly, he let loose a torrent of passion, so tremendous, so overwhelming, so compelling that the audience gasped—could not speak—could not move. When the curtain fell, for a few minutes they were too much overcome to applaud. Of all the tributes to an actor this is, perhaps, the supreme tribute. It means that for a little space the audience has been torn from the theatre—has gone with the player into the land of his illusion, and must rub its eyes and wake before it can bring its hands to sound its satisfaction!

The "Trial" scene was another glorious experience for Kean. Here again he held the people in a kind of trance, as he went through the long gamut of emotions, beginning with contemptuous pride and ending with despairing humility. There was another act to follow in



which he was not concerned. He dressed quickly and went home. Rushing to his wife, he caught her in his arms and told her of his triumph. "We shall ride in our carriage yet," he assured her. "And our boy Charles shall go to Eton." Later he sat by the fire after a joyous supper and told Mary that that night he could not "feel the stage" under him, so tremendous had been the urge of his acting.

Next morning, the newspaper critics set forth their views. All agreed that he was a fine actor, but there was no enthusiasm except on the part of Hazlitt, who at that time was writing for the *Morning Chronicle*. Hazlitt, most discerning of men, realized that a new genius had arisen, and it was he, who in after years wrote of Kean, that to see him in certain parts was like reading Shakespeare "by flashes of lightning!"

Five days passed before Edmund Kean again acted at Drury Lane. He now played "Richard the Third." The house was crowded with people who had been waiting throughout the afternoon. In coffee house and tavern, and indeed wherever people came together, it had been rumoured that one even greater than Garrick had come to town—that this little undersized man—half gipsy, half Jew—possessed a demoniacal genius!

It was a night that will always stand out in the long eventful history of Drury Lane Theatre. The intensity—the passion—the fury of the actor, broke down all criticism. The very players who had sneered at him now stood at the side of the stage and, with the emotional variability of their tribe, applauded him with voice and hand. "Why, he looks a different man—taller, bigger!" said Munden, who had been his chief detractor. It was

the truth ! No longer did they look upon a squat little man, barely five feet six inches in height. They saw tragedy made into flesh !

That night consolidated the success of Kean. The critics no longer were half-hearted. They sat down and wrote that here was the real thing, and that Edmund Kean was sealed of the Order of Garrick, of Betterton, and those other men who had gained enduring fame in the history of our stage.

\* \* \*

In the year that followed, Kean became a very rich and important person. His coming to Drury Lane had changed the fortunes of that theatre which had been painfully near to bankruptcy. Kean was now what is called a "lion" of society. He took a house in Clarges Street, where he entertained all sorts and conditions of people from dukes to pugilists. But the Bohemian streak in Kean caused him to shrink from the solemnities of the rich and sedate. Often, he would incontinently steal away from his guests and go down to the "Coal Hole," a tavern off the Strand, where he would sit for hours, drinking brandy and speaking no word. Even at this time, when all London was going down on its knees to him, he did not come near happiness. There was, of course, a series of spasmodic excitements—of joyous moments—but of the peace of mind which is, perhaps, the closest thing to happiness that we know, this man knew nothing. One doubts if ever he experienced throughout his forty-six years one whole day of solid satisfaction !



All his life, Kean had loved brandy, and now he began to drink very steadily. Already he was degenerating. Outside his work at the theatre he had no interests except eccentricities. He would get up in the night and ride furiously through the outskirts of London on his horse "Shylock"—in his drawing-room he sometimes played with a tame lion to amuse his guests and himself. He was wildly generous, absurdly careless of money matters. Visitors coming to the house would sometimes find his little son playing on the carpet with a heap of guineas which his father had set down on the mantelpiece or on a table, and had forgotten. Like Alexandre Dumas, Kean kept an ever-ready bank for his friends, upon which they could draw as much as they pleased. To his wife he was always kind, generous, thoughtful, but there were lapses with other women, and not women of the best kind. There was one woman known to her friends as "Ophelia," who in later years gained a tremendous hold upon the actor, sponged on him, ridiculed him, led him through a maze of miseries and follies, and finally left him when he was too ill to divert her or reward her.

At the theatre he went on adding success to success. Whilst he did not distinguish himself hugely in parts of the "Hamlet" order, where reserve and dignity are more concerned than volcanic passion, nevertheless he gave to those parts a significance and a vitality that delighted the more discerning critics. In his own region of limitless passion, there was none to beat him. Perhaps the most remarkable of his characterizations from the point of view of its influence on the audience was "Sir Giles Overreach" in *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*.



So tremendous was the rage of Kean—so overwhelming his passion—that the seasoned players on the stage beside him were themselves terrified and overcome. “I could not meet his eyes,” said one of them, “they seemed to burn and shrivel a man as though by some inward fire!” When Kean came home after his first performance in “Sir Giles,” his wife asked him what had happened, and especially how Lord Essex (a considerable patron of the actor) had received it. “Damn Lord Essex,” replied Kean. “The pit rose at me!”

It is difficult for us, perhaps, accustomed to modern acting that makes small demands upon the passion of the actor, to form an adequate conception of what Kean must have been to the audience who were privileged to see his performance. There was no barn-storming in the man—no rant. Rant means sound without sense. With Kean, there was always the throbbing heart in every word—always conviction, sincerity. I think, perhaps, that Kean was the sort of actor who in one hour may change a man's views of life. There are certain books which we read, and after reading them, we know that we shall never again be quite the same sort of persons. I think if I had seen Kean in “Lear,” I would have come out of the theatre knowing that henceforth there would be a difference. . . .

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In 1815, the health of Kean was showing very serious signs of decay. Frequently after a performance, he would lie on a sofa in his dressing room, vomiting, spitting up blood, hardly able to move. This degeneration in health

reacted on his character. He became absurdly sensitive. He could not endure the semblance of ridicule. Once at a tavern when an amateur mimic gave an imitation of Kean and other actors, Kean, in a fury, flung his wine in the mimic's face. He said that if he were such a wretch as the imitation suggested, he would immediately hang himself!

Kean, whilst acting season after season at Drury Lane, sometimes toured the principal cities of the kingdom. In Exeter, where years before he had known some of his hardest defeats, he now acted to audiences who were ready to worship him. When he arrived in a town, he received a reception such as might have been given to His Majesty himself.

In 1818 he went to Paris, where he made so great an impression that Alexandre Dumas at a later time wrote a play whereof Kean was the hero. In Paris, the actor met among other famous persons the great Talma—a player of a range and type diametrically opposite to the range and type of the Englishman. The two became great friends. Talma's criticism of Kean was kindly, but characteristic of a man trained in the severe classic school of the Comedie Française, with its academic views on diction, gesture and style. "Kean," said Talma, "is undoubtedly a very marvellous gem, but the gem is badly set."

Two years later, Kean was in America. Great masses of people came to see him act, but the critics were by no means unanimous in their praise of him. At Boston, Kean did a foolish thing. Owing to the theatre not being sufficiently crowded, he refused to appear, and this action caused considerable annoyance to the Bostonians,



who have always been an exceptionally sensitive people. There followed quarrels, correspondence, recriminations, explanations. At length Kean, entirely disgusted, left America and came back to London, where Elliston (who was now a Director of Drury Lane Theatre) received him with a huge procession of men and horses. Elliston, a very clever showman, never lost an opportunity of advertising his wares.

Kean came back to Drury Lane to receive more plaudits than he had ever known, but he was entirely miserable. He was now haunted by a dread that he was soon to die. The fear became an obsession, and often he would talk of nothing else. Had Kean lived to-day, he would, perhaps, have hurried off to a psycho-analyst, who in driving out one phobia might have induced another. But in 1821, the world (fortunately or unfortunately) was innocent of Herr Freud and Herr Jung, and Kean soon cured himself of the obsession by work and by devotion to a love affair, which formed the principal episode of his life outside the theatre.

For seven or eight years he carried on an intrigue with the young wife of a certain Alderman named Cox. He had met the Coxes in the provinces whilst he was playing in one of the larger cities, and instantly a friendship had begun. Husband and wife were charmed with Kean. He was invited to their house in London, and soon became a daily visitor.

It has been said that in all love affairs there is one who loves and one who simply allows love to be given. It was thus with the adventure of Edmund Kean and Charlotte Cox. Kean with his everlasting intensity applied himself to Charlotte as he might have applied



himself to "Shylock," or to "Othello." He studied her, enveloped himself in her, reached a point when as he himself said, he would have seen the world topple to pieces rather than give her up. After a long night spent in an exhausting performance, he would go to his hotel and sit up till dawn, writing letters to a woman who, perhaps, valued him only because he was a celebrated person, and because he gave her presents of jewels and money whenever she desired them. Her husband, the meanest of men, encouraged the gifts, and probably shared the spoils with the mercenary creature.

Cox evidently took eight years to convince himself that his wife was breaking a commandment, and one imagines that there was plenty of connivance of a kind which would to-day render a decree impossible. That he must have known what was happening seems practically certain, yet he took no action until his wife was turning her affections towards a young clerk. Then did the outraged husband commune with himself and perceive that in view of this default from Kean, there might be a default in the money and jewel gifts. That decided him. He issued a writ against Edmund Kean, not for divorce, but for damages for the seduction of his wife.

The trial occupied a single day. Kean naturally made no attempt to deny the charges. The fiery letters which he had written to Charlotte Cox held a meaning concerning which there could be no doubt. Evidence was called to prove that many times he had met Mrs. Cox in circumstances that afforded both of them opportunities for illicit indulgences. After a dreary trial wherein Kean had been denounced by the husband's counsel as a villain of unspeakable deceit and vileness,

the jury found a verdict for Mr. Cox with damages of £800.

Queen Victoria at that time was in her nursery. The prim age which we call the Early Victorian, with its antimacassars, its horsehair sofas, and its shoddy morality, was yet to be born, but although a rakish King was on the throne, England nevertheless was subject to what Macaulay has styled one of her periodic outbreaks of morality. Kean was hissed when he left the court—and all those virtuous citizens and citizenesses whose sins had thus far escaped detection, united to demonstrate that he was an unclean and horrible person !

At the theatre, there was great anxiety. The Directors perceived that it would be madness to allow the actor to appear whilst the storm of indignation was at its first heavy blast. Elliston himself went down to Croydon, where Kean was now lodging, and begged him to abandon his intention of appearing at Drury Lane until the divorce proceedings were beginning to fade from the public memory.

But Kean was obstinate. He reminded Elliston that his contract authorized him to appear in the following week. Nothing could drive him from this purpose. Elliston left the house, terrified. He knew better than Kean could know exactly what was going to happen.

On the night of January 17th, 1825, exactly one week after the date of the proceedings in the courts, Kean made his appearance at Drury Lane. It was a night to be remembered. For hours people had waited at the doors, as though it had been the opening night of a new performance. Outside the playhouse, rotten eggs were being sold in order that those moral souls who wished



to air their morality might signify their views with sound conviction. The crowd was so great that many women and men fainted. Presently when the theatre was so packed with people that the attendants had to withdraw into the corridors, the curtain rose on the first act of *Richard the Third*.

The newspaper men, chatting together, predicted that this first act would also be the last—that Kean would not be allowed even to open his mouth. It is hard, perhaps, in our tolerant age to realize exactly the emotions of audiences of a hundred years ago towards breakers of the seventh commandment. Although they acknowledged that actors were to some extent licensed sinners—not conformable to the ordinary code—nevertheless, if a prominent player openly transgressed, he had to bear a heavy burden of abuse and hatred.

Kean came on to the stage and opened his mouth to speak the words : “ Now is the winter of our discontent—Made glorious summer by the sun of York.” But before the second line had been spoken, the storm broke. There were shouts, groans, hisses, hootings, cat-calls, curses ! Here and there some persons applauded, but the applause was a tiny trickle against a tidal wave of denunciation. “ Villain ! ” “ Adulterer ! ” “ Robber ! ” “ Scoundrel ! ” These were some of the epithets flung at the actor who with the hunched back of “ Richard ” stood rigid, waiting for the storm to end.

In the pit there was fighting. Two factions came to blows. Noisy youths, amused rather than scandalized, began to sing snatches from operas. Meantime, Edmund, though stricken hard, bore himself well. Many times did he hold up his hand, imploring silence so that he



might speak to the people and explain himself. But they would have none of his defence.

At length the old tradition of the actor came to his aid. "There are some who have come to see me act. They have paid their money. They shall not be cheated." Urged on by this tradition, Kean and his companions now set themselves to go through a five-act tragedy, knowing that not a single line would be heard. So cool was Kean in this moment of self-discipline that actually he would pause in his acting from time to time to remove with his sword shreds of orange-peel that ruffians had flung upon the stage.

After the tragedy, there was a short pantomime, which calmed the audience, or, perhaps, bored them into comparative docility. Elliston, on coming forward to speak, was received with courtesy, and it says much for his managerial courage that he told the audience he had engaged Kean for a certain period and had no intention of breaking his agreement. He then asked them to listen to Kean.

Wearing his stage clothes, the actor, now looking very old and very tired, came down to the footlights and asked if he might speak. Silence at last! Then he spoke these words:

"Ladies and Gentlemen: If it be supposed by those I am addressing that I stand before you for the purpose of explaining or justifying my private conduct, I must beg leave to state that they will be disappointed, for I am quite unable to do so. I stand before you as the representative of Shakespeare's heroes, and by the public voice must I stand or fall. My private conduct has

been investigated before a legal tribunal, and decency has forbidden me publishing letters which would have inculpated others, though such a course would, in great degree, have exculpated myself. . . . If the public is of opinion that my conduct merits expulsion from the stage, I am ready to bow to its decision and to take my farewell."

Then, there was a sort of half-reaction. Although there was much hissing, there were cries of "No, No, Kean for ever," and other cheering retorts. The lights were then lowered, the audience went away more or less quietly, and one more memorable page had been added to the long history of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane.

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At subsequent performances, there were mild demonstrations, but gradually the indignation died, and Kean came back to favour. But he had received a blow from which he could not easily recover. Moreover, the defection of Charlotte in favour of a younger man had cut him deeply. His wife and family had, of course, fallen away from him, and he was forced to rely upon his old aide-de-camp—the brandy bottle.

His memory was playing unkind tricks. Although his acting still reached an incomparable level, the retention of the words of the part was often a hard matter. Sometimes he would cut out entire scenes—leaping from one scene to a later episode, apparently without the slightest knowledge of the blunder. At other times, coming on the stage half-drunk, he would laugh foolishly and turn somersaults or leap over chairs. After feats of this kind,



he would say in a loud whisper : " I may as well practise ; for to this I shall perhaps be returning very soon ! " He had been a tumbler in the old bad days—it seemed to him that to tumbling he might come back.

His face and person had gone down into depths of degeneration. A man who saw him at this period said that he " looked bloated with rage and brandy." He was hard-up, and although for years his income had exceeded £10,000 a year, he was practically without funds.

England now seemed to him an undesirable place. He went again to America, hoping that he might gain there enough money to enable him to live independently of the stage for the remainder of his life. But a terrible disillusion awaited him. America, even more a " censor morum " than England, was furious with Kean. The news of the divorce had, of course, travelled across the Atlantic, and when he opened his tour at the Park Theatre, New York, he had again to face a prolonged organized opposition. Once more he went through an entire performance to an audience that heard hardly three consecutive lines. The hostility was due partly to the Cox affair—partly to the bad odour he had set up by his refusal to play at Boston during his first visit.

Kean now played a diplomatic part. Next morning, he wrote letters to the Press, admitting that he deserved a certain amount of reproach, but that as far as Boston was concerned, he would make the " amende honourable." He would go to that city when he left New York and give them of his best.

But Boston was not in a forgiving mood. The insolence of Kean's behaviour when he had refused to play



to a poorly filled theatre might by this time have been pardoned, but the divorce still remained as a terrible indictment. On the opening night at Boston there was a serious riot. The theatre came near to being wrecked. The life of the actor was in danger. Crowds waited at the entrances to assail him. The management hid the unhappy actor in a remote place under the stage, and in the early hours of morning, Kean, wearing an elaborate disguise, was bundled into a coach and taken to the house of a friend where he remained until he could travel to New York.

In Philadelphia and Baltimore he had receptions of a milder kind. There was some opposition, but the brutality of Boston was not repeated. In Canada he did well. In certain towns, Indians came from the reservations to see his performance. So delighted were these ingenuous people with his acting that they gave him the highest honour at their command—they made him a Chief! Kean, with the childishness of the theatrical temperament, was immensely pleased with the compliment.

He came back to England, fatigued, disappointed, in the early part of 1827. And then there happened an episode that clearly marked the beginning of the end. His friend Grattan had written a play, *Ben Zarzir*—with a part that seemed to Kean packed with opportunities. He accepted the play, and it was put into immediate rehearsal. Grattan was very excited; this was his first work—he built upon it many hopes. Moreover, everything seemed to promise well for its success. Kean was now in good odour again—the affair at the courts had been partially forgotten during his absence in America.

All went well up to the opening night. Then at the very outset of the play, Kean failed to take up his cue ; and after a long wait, during which the terrified actors stood dumb with anxiety, he was discovered in his dressing-room, sobbing violently and crying out that he could not remember a single word of his part.

They seized him and almost by force thrust him on the stage, believing that when he was on those boards the instinct of the actor would do its work. But they were wrong. Kean swayed, staggered, looked round piteously, and then tried to speak the opening lines. Hardly two consecutive lines of the speech as Grattan had written it were spoken by Kean. The miserable author put his fingers to his ears to shut out what must have seemed to him like blasphemies. As for Kean, Grattan afterwards said that the man "stood there fixed, and drawled out incoherent words. He gave the notion of a person who had been half-hanged and then dragged through a pond ! He went through the act like a man in the last stage of exhaustion. I felt, though I could not hear, the voiceless verdict of damnation !"

After the wretched ordeal had ended, the manager spoke half a dozen words of apology for Kean, saying he had been taken ill. A little later, Grattan met the actor on his way to the dressing-room. And when Kean said : "I have ruined a fine play, Grattan, and cannot look you in the face," Grattan, with heroic spirit, actually consoled him and indeed seemed more sorry for Kean than for himself. The tragedy was never again acted.

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The association of Edmund Kean with Drury Lane ended abruptly and disastrously. He made a terrible blunder by appearing as "Henry the Fifth," a part for which he was entirely unsuited in physique and in temperament. That his performance held many flashes of genius we may be certain, but the general result was failure. At the end, there were groans and hisses. Kean was foolish enough to make a speech. "I have served you well!" he protested. "Aye, and you have been well paid for it!" cried a voice in the pit. "Why do you drink so much?" asked another critic, and indeed the performance that night had been marred, as usual, by many lapses due to brandy.

The Drury Lane authorities were disgusted. They hinted to Kean that they would have no more of him. In his despair, he wrote to his friend Halpin of the *Star* newspaper, these pathetic words:

"Fight for me! I have no resources left, and Memory, the first of the Goddesses, has now forsaken me. I am left without a hope but those resources that the public and myself are tired of. . . . God Damn Ambition! *The soul leaps. The body falls.*"

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In 1830, a rumour went round the country that Kean was on the point of leaving the stage. A "benefit" had been arranged for him at the King's Theatre. He played single acts from a number of tragedies wherein he had made a success. The audience believed that they were looking on him for the last time. The voice that once had been mobile and sweet was now hoarse and rough.



The eyes were faded. Old age had come upon him, who, reckoned by the foolish measure of years, was only three years past forty.

But an English audience, although in former years too censorious, perhaps, of private morals, was then, as to-day, an audience kind to old favourites. In France, Kean would have been applauded after the divorce action, but soundly hissed when his acting had declined. Here in England, exactly the reverse happened. For never was there more enthusiastic applause than on that night at the King's Theatre, when the broken actor spoke what many believed were his last stage words.

Kean confirmed this belief by his speech after the performance. "The time has now arrived," he said, "for me to return you my most fervent thanks and bid you a long, long farewell."

Kean himself believed that he had finished. His farewell was no piece of showmanship, to be followed by specious additions in the form of gaudily advertised provincial "farewells" and other exhibitions of that depressing kind. He was in a state when he hated himself—his acting—his audiences—everything! He wanted to be alone—to patch up the remains of his life in peace.

To Richmond he went after a short sojourn at his little house in Bute where he had frequently spent holidays. Invigorated perhaps by his time in Scotland, he was again fired by his stage love. The Richmond theatre, which had fallen on hard times, was to be let. Kean took the house, and lived in the house adjoining the theatre. The people of Richmond were glad to have him among them—the scandal was now partially forgotten—

and his drinking habits were not regarded with great aversion by a hard-drinking population.

The season, however, was not successful. Kean was no longer a fine actor. People at first came to see him, brought to the theatre by curiosity. They were disappointed, and they did not return. Sometimes he played to a theatre that held only a handful of persons.

His life now was very lonely. It pains one to look upon Kean in those long days at Richmond, sitting in the little house, with windows that looked upon the Green, with no solace left to him but brandy and a memory. To that house there came from time to time friends, among them Miss Tidswell, who had known him when he was a child and had given him his first lessons in elocution. And here, on those evenings when he was not acting, Kean, looking an old, old man, would sometimes sing and play for the visitors. In the middle of a song, he would break off and flash out a reminiscence of an old triumph. Then he would cover his face with his hands, and say : " All gone ! All gone ! "

For that is, of course, the actor's tragedy. The author may pore upon his book—the artist may look upon his canvas—the engineer may point with joy to his engine, but for the actor there is nothing but a memory, a reminiscence—and perhaps a half-amused smile on the face of the man who listens and is bored. . . .

Sometimes, Kean roused himself sufficiently to play for a night at the Haymarket or at Brighton. He appeared on several occasions with the egotistical and puritanical Macready. The two men took an instant dislike to each other. After the performance, Macready characteristically referred to Kean as " that low man." Yet,



that Macready could be magnanimous on occasions is proved by the fact that after having seen Kean in "Richard" many years previously, he said to a friend: "After witnessing the acting of Kean, I feel that I ought never to act again. He surpasses us all."

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The end was now approaching. Kean, very feeble, would rise late, and after breakfast would walk for some time in Richmond Park, leaning painfully on a stick. A small, shrivelled, bent old man with nothing living in him but the volcanic eyes—that was how this man of forty-six seemed to those who met him on the way. He had become something of a cynic by reason of his dealings with mankind, but he loved children. Frequently he would sit and talk with them, giving them sweets from a bag which he carried for their benefit.

It is possible that Kean would not have acted again but for the fact that his son Charles was to appear as "Iago," and begged his father to celebrate the occasion by coming from his retirement to play "Othello." Kean had never wished that his son should become an actor—had indeed said many times that he himself would be the first and last tragedian of his name. Charles, however, had broken down his father's opposition, and had gained a moderate success. It may be said of him briefly that he never gained a very great reputation as a player, but was the first person to introduce spectacular effects of any magnitude.

On the night of March 25th, 1833, Kean made his last appearance on the stage. All day long he was very



anxious. Late in the afternoon, he drove to Covent Garden Theatre, saying to his son over and over again, "I may not be able to act to-night." When he arrived at the theatre, he sat huddled over the fire, looking like a man prepared for the grave.

He was helped into his clothes, and then sat for a long time, muttering to himself the words of his part, fearful lest he should forget them. When the cue for his entrance arrived they roused him from his reverie and helped him from the dressing-room to the stage.

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Before an audience which was perhaps the greatest that he had ever faced, Edmund Kean took his last look at the living world. For a time, he played with something of his old fervour, but it was clear to everybody that he was fighting every inch of the way. However, all went well until the terrible outburst in the scene wherein Othello takes Iago by the throat and speaks the words :

" Villain ! Be sure thou prove my love a whore,  
Be sure of it ; give me the ocular proof."

At that point, Kean collapsed. He stopped, stared round, and then saying in a whisper, " Speak to them for me, Charles," sank into the arms of his son. The curtain was rung down, and the half-dying actor was carried to the dressing-room where he lay unconscious for hours.

Kean did not die that night. He lingered till the early summer, nursed by the excellent Miss Tidswell and his loving secretary, Mr. Lee. His wife, whom he had not seen for eight years, came to stay with him, and there

was a reconciliation. Kean said to her frequently, "Come, bear up, happiness shall still be ours!" He pointed out to her that all was well—that their son Charles was gaining success—and that he himself would try and make her happy if life was given him.

*Dis aliter visum!* He was railed off from the living. Delirium seized him on the evening of May 14th, 1833. Even as Sarah Bernhardt in her last moments babbled of "Phedre" and "Camille," so did Edmund Kean in his last wanderings of the brain murmur of the parts which he had played. "Hamlet," "Othello," "Richard," "Shylock"—the words came to his lips, mingling with the froth of mortality. And at nine o'clock on the morning of the 15th, "this disease of life," as Socrates called it, was ended for Edmund Kean.

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They would not have him at Westminster Abbey. Sinners more grievous than poor Kean had been taken there with pomp and pretentiousness, but the sin of Kean had been too spectacular. He was buried in the parish church of Richmond. On the day of the funeral, the shops were closed in the town. Players came from all parts of the country, some of them making the journey on foot because they could not afford to ride. No public memorial was built, and not till six years after his death did his son see fit to place a headstone over the earth that covered an actor who was, in some respects, the most tremendous personage that ever spoke upon a stage.

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For, in his own narrow range, Kean was supreme.

Macready may have had greater dignity and breadth—Kemble may have possessed a finer presence and a more majestic envisagement of his parts—Garrick undoubtedly was more versatile, but Kean, because of a certain flame-like intensity, a certain elusive spirituality, held a place where none of those fine actors could approach him.

For comedy, except in its more sardonic and virulent exhibitions, he had no gift, but in tragedy, he seemed to put aside his flesh and to become a disembodied spirit. We who live to-day have no actor whose genius can be weighed in the balance with genius of the kind. Those who are old enough to remember Salvini may, perhaps, have been privileged to see a demoniacal passion and fury that savoured of Kean, but the performance of Salvini was animal—there was no touch of that spiritual essence which made the acting of Kean a thing apart—a thing to live in the memory of the spectator like the memory of a sharp wound—or a lost love.

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On the stone that lies above the dust of Kean in Richmond Churchyard, there is no epitaph. Let us add an epitaph—the words of Kean himself, for of a certainty they crystallize his tragedy :

*“ The soul leaps. The body falls.”*



## Cora Pearl

(1842-1886)

THE courtesan, like the criminal, like a force of Nature, takes the way of least resistance. It is probable that she is a person who, having superficially examined the chances and vagaries of life, comes to the conclusion that herself is her best asset for the securing of money, power, and soft living. Sometimes, she may dabble with the arts, choosing the theatrical art because it is the most capable of yielding a display of the body. Rarely, however, does she continue for any length of time in the theatre. There is too much routine—there is a certain amount of hard work. The life of the professional trafficker in love does not stimulate the energies.

At the age of fifteen Cora Pearl deliberately set herself to exploit her body. In her *Memoirs* (a crude and dreary little book), she has assured us that she would perhaps have lived an entirely virtuous life but for the molestation of an elderly satyr, who having made her acquaintance in the street, took her to an hotel, gave her drugged wines, and finally dismissed her in the morning with a five pound note as the wage of the night. However, she evidently recovered from the shock sufficiently to turn her back on her home (a frowsy place, where bohemianism ran mad), and to take a lodging at the house of a notorious woman.

There has been some argument concerning the parentage of this Cora. It was suggested at one time that her father was a keeper of a livery stable. She herself furiously contradicted this assertion, and claimed to be the daughter of Crouch, the musician, who wrote "Kathleen



CORA PEARL





Mavourneen." The matter is not a very important one.

She had spent eight years of her childhood (previous to the episode recorded above) at a school in Boulogne, where she had learned with a certain precocity a great deal about the sordid side of life. It is possible that after the incident with the elderly brute, certain memories may have returned to her, and she may have resolved to act upon their suggestions. Unless one assumes something of the kind, one cannot explain why she resolutely sought the house of evil reputation.

Cora was not enchanted with her new surroundings, but realized that she was only at the beginning of things. Already she saw herself developing into a very important personage. In the meantime, she regarded the demi-mondaine, whose hospitality she enjoyed, as an instrument to be put aside when it had served its end.

In order to provide money for an elopement to Paris with a youth whom she had met at a dancing hall, Cora played a very specious trick. She forged a document purporting to be the will of her grandmother, who had recently died, and having inserted her name as the sole beneficiary of a considerable estate, borrowed from an unsuspecting and probably half-infatuated solicitor the sum of £900 against the document. As a matter of fact, her grandmother had made no will, for the best of all reasons—she had nothing to leave !

The instant the money was in her possession, Cora went away with young Bankwell. She had no affection for the youth—but she wanted to return to France, where she felt more in her element than in England. Moreover, she reflected with wisdom beyond her age

(she was then only sixteen), that his co-operation might be useful to her in Paris for the purpose of gaining introductions to rich men.

It will be clear that this Emma Crouch (Cora Pearl was a name that she took at a later time) entered upon the profession of the courtesan as deliberately, as resolutely as another woman might have chosen the profession of a singer or an actress. There was no casual drifting—the thing was thought out with a certain cold precision.

Her association with the man with whom she had left England did not endure more than a few months. He soon became something of a nuisance to Cora, he was too affectionate—desired to marry her. From marriage she shrank with disgust—she said that she would never give any man a legal right to control her. After many quarrels, the youth returned to England, and Cora joyously set out to make new conquests.

By this time, she was a complete merchant of love. One uses the word in deference to convention—an Anglo-Saxon and biblical word of one syllable would, of course, be the better form of expression. She had discovered that by some extraordinary trick of the sense, she could secure a hold upon men which would render them powerless. She resolved to exploit this trick with every ingenuity at her command.

She was always businesslike. She chose men for their purses—never for their appearance. In the *Memoirs*, she tries to justify her hardness—her mercenary tricks—by saying that a woman who had suffered her early experience at the hands of a brutal man, need show no mercy to anything that bore the shape of a man. One need not be a cynic, however, if one smiles a little at



this specious justification. One imagines that Cora would have bled men quite as mercilessly if they had been saints instead of sinners.

An "affair" with a handsome young sailor, D'Amenard, did not last long, for his money was soon exhausted. After a few weeks, Cora asked him for a statement of his finances in regard to herself. The examination was unsatisfactory, and the wretched fellow was dismissed.

The next episode was more enduring. She was now associated with a Monsieur Lassema—a very rich man—of a distinguished family. He spent many thousands of pounds upon her. He raised money on every conceivable security to give to the woman. She was never satisfied. It was always "More ! More ! More !"

After the exchequer of Lassema was exhausted, Cora turned her attention to an Oriental charlatan, Said Khan, who at that time was intriguing Paris as a magician and crystal reader. The fellow probably possessed some elementary hypnotic powers ; his chief asset, however, was infinite impudence. The fools and revellers of that hectic period of the Third Empire came to his rooms, and gave him large sums in return for specious predictions and assurances. Cora, who was entirely unsuperstitious, laughed at his pretensions, but realized that they were a source of considerable income. Very soon she had begun a liaison with the charlatan—an association that ended with peculiar abruptness.

The "Magician" hit upon the idea of a sort of financial partnership of a peculiarly horrible kind. He came to Cora with the suggestion that he should introduce to her the wealthiest of his clients, and that together they should share the spoils. She was disgusted—



not because she regarded the transaction as hideous—but because she could not tolerate the idea of a “protector” who desired a share of her gains. She became violently angry and threatened to send for the police.

The charlatan struck her in the face. There followed a struggle, wherein he endeavoured to strangle her, but Cora, an alert sort of person, contrived to wrench herself free and to stun him with a blow of a chair. The noise alarmed the house. People came running to the room. Cora was immediately arrested and taken to the police bureau. For a time she was in a state of fear, believing that she had killed the man, but presently there came to her M. Delamarche (a recent lover), a man of some importance in the official world. He announced that the Oriental had not been seriously hurt—moreover, there would be no prosecution.

\* \* \*

Intrigue followed intrigue, if one may give the name to such crudities. Sometimes the affair lasted a few months—sometimes a few weeks—sometimes only a single night. Money was now pouring in upon her. She squandered it on all sorts and conditions of absurdities, but was wise enough to invest a good portion in carriages, horses, jewels, pictures, gold and silver plate and other things that at a later time might prove useful assets.

Of course she was robbed by many people. Tradesmen, servants, acquaintances—all of them did their share. Courtesans soon lose all sense of values. In neighbourhoods where they live, the prices of commodities are frequently inflated. Enraged if they are

offered one gold piece less than they imagine their charms should fetch, they will smilingly submit to wholesale robbery where their vanity and self-esteem are not involved.

She could be charitable within limits. She never gave to men, but to her own class she was generous. Using her housekeeper as a sort of almoner, Cora Pearl regularly assisted a large number of women of the pavement when they fell on hard times. Sometimes she would disburse 100,000 francs in a few weeks in this way.

She could afford to give. From one man, M. Moray, she received during the course of their friendship several hundreds of thousands of pounds. It has been suggested that if all the moneys and all the gifts presented to this woman during her short life had been totalled, the amount would probably have been in excess of one million pounds!

\* \* \*

With M. Moray Cora went to Baden where she frequently amused herself at the gambling tables, finding there a refuge from the boredom that was closing in upon her. This boredom of the professional love trafficker must be a terrible thing. After the fierceness of erotic excitements, the exhausted brain can hardly turn with satisfaction to the ordinary diversions of existence. There must be a series of anti-climaxes. With every whim gratified—with every intellectual avenue barred by thick bars of inertia—the day of the courtesan must be a long, dreary day.

Inexpressibly bored, she tried to find amusement



(when the gambling excitement failed) in the playing of practical jokes upon acquaintances, in which diversion she was aided by several young men who hoped to gain her favours. The jokes were played upon certain dignified persons who had snubbed her during her stay in Baden. One of the "jokes" was the burning down of an exquisite summer-house.

Having left Baden and gone to Vichy, Cora suddenly assumed a sober and restrained manner. The Emperor Napoleon was in the town, and it seemed to her that by attempting the manner of a great lady, she might attract that feeble personage.

We are left in a state of doubt as to what really happened in connection with the Emperor and Cora. That there was some kind of acknowledgment of the courtesan by Napoleon we may feel tolerably certain—but after that, all is mere conjecture. Of course, there were many rumours, some of them childish and grotesque. For instance, it was hinted at one time that she had been given a serious political mission to Prussia. One imaginative historian has written that after the debacle at Sedan, Cora went to that town to console the stricken Emperor. Another gossip has said that throughout the campaign Napoleon sent her daily telegrams announcing his progress.

In her *Memoirs*, Cora makes no reference to Napoleon, but that fact does not necessarily mean that she was at no time associated with him. Many important personages are ignored in those precious pages—and the reason for the ignoring of them will be explained in a later section.

Of one thing, however, we are assured—and that is that Cora behaved admirably during the war. All



her sympathies were with France. Although born an Englishwoman, she had come to look upon France as her constant home. For England she had the dislike which is held by many English people who have gone to France in their youth and remained there all their lives—a dislike that is probably due to the fact that they have become Gallicized beyond recognition. Cora loved Paris as, perhaps, she had never loved a lover. When the war broke out, she converted her house into a hospital, sold many of her treasures to provide nurses and doctors, and worked among the wounded men with great industry and kindness. Many women of the fashionable world came to the hospital to see their friends and relatives, and Cora, during that time, was treated with considerable favour by these ladies. She was disgusted to find that when the war was ended, these same women pretended not to know her.

Perhaps it was this attitude on the part of those who were associated with the ruling class that caused a certain reaction to seize Cora at a later time—a reaction that actually made her present to the Government a huge bill for the expenses which she had incurred at the hospital.

The Government, true to the tradition of governments, repudiated the account. Cora immediately brought an action in the courts. She won her battle, but was awarded a meagre, only a meagre 15,000 francs. She had probably spent four times that sum !

In order to avoid the Commune that followed the debacle, Cora went to England with Prince Rostoff—a Polish nobleman who at that time was her principal patron. There followed visits to many Continental

watering places, where she scandalized the more sober-minded people by eccentric behaviour and by very daring costumes. She was now in that state when her egotism asserted itself so triumphantly that she felt she could do no wrong. The mere fact that a thing was done by herself made that thing beautiful and right.

When Rostoff palled, or when his gifts were beginning to droop, Cora found a new patron in the aged Khadif Bey, an enormously rich Arab who was nearly seventy years old. With this patriarchal personage she lived in what the ancient "penny-novelette" writers would have called "Oriental splendour." The Arab, obsessed by Cora, wanted to marry her and take her to his home. She refused, of course.

She was disgusted, perhaps, by the old man's humility. Sometimes, he would kneel at her feet, this dotard, saying that she might humiliate him as she chose, but that he would suffer any degradation rather than lose her affections. Eventually, Cora, bored beyond endurance, left the Arab, and went back to her house in the Rue de Chaillot. This magnificent house (which rumour suggested was a gift of Napoleon) was sometimes called "Les Petits Tuileries"—a hint as to the identity of its donor that may, or may not, have had a solid foundation.

Although Cora was wearied by her Arab lover, she speaks of him in the *Memoirs* with kindness :

"He was a character of the Arabian Nights," she says. "He had the heart of an artist and the purse of a mighty lord. The Queen of Sheba would have found his house as splendid as that of Solomon . . . I bathed daily in basins of pink marble. . . ." The reminiscence continues in a rhodomontade of childish exuberance,



probably inspired by the penny-a-liner who aided her with the book.

At the Rue de Chaillot she entertained all sorts and conditions of people, from princes and ambassadors down to commercial travellers. Many artists, authors, and actors came to the house, but these people she did not greatly encourage for obvious reasons. "The cleverer they are, the less money they have," she would point out. "Give me an artist to sit to, but a merchant to embrace!"

There were no abnormalities—no perversions in her nature. All her amorous cards were on the table—she kept nothing back. She did not like women. A woman admirer once came into a studio where Cora Pearl was posing to a sculptor, and having looked for a moment at the gracious figure, knelt down and kissed the bare feet. Cora was disgusted, ordered her out of the studio and never spoke to her again. Cora, naturally not a *censor morum*, was always indignant on the subject of abnormalities. "They should all of them be shot!" she would say when the subject was brought into conversation. "Do not speak to me of these horrors, for they make me sick!"

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In 1873, the Shah of Persia was in France. That ingenuous ruler had heard much of Cora Pearl, and hinted that it would give him pleasure to pay her a State visit. To this end, Cora prepared a banquet, to which the Shah and his entourage were invited.

The facts of the subsequent relationship are hazy. One thing emerges—the infatuated Shah presented the



woman with a gold collar said to be worth £10,000. At the same time, he suggested that Cora should return with him to Persia and enter his "hareem." Cora, believing that the suggestion was jestingly made, said that she would consider the proposal.

The episode of the Shah ended with abruptness. One night, whilst Cora was at the Opera, the monarch came to her box. She sat with him in an exposed position in front of the box, chatting, laughing, patting his cheek. The audience was horrified. Although Latin races are perhaps not prejudiced against coloured people to the extent that prevails among Nordic peoples, they cannot look with satisfaction upon the association of black and white, when the white chances to be a woman. Moreover, Parisians for some time had been prejudiced against Cora Pearl because of her association with the Emperor. In less than five minutes there was uproar. Hissing broke out in the cheaper sections of the theatre. People shook their fists at the occupants of the box. "Turn out the English ——!" someone shouted. A man stood up in the stalls and after comparative silence had been restored, said in a loud voice: "As a Frenchman, I indignantly protest against this English —— coming here among our wives and daughters, and making an open parade of her black lover! Are we Frenchmen going to submit to this insult?"

Cora, unmoved, contemptuous, stood up in the box and tried to speak, but the people would not listen. The noise increased; the attendants endeavoured, in vain, to pacify the enraged moralists. A riot seemed imminent. At length, a number of persons made for the box, saying they would tear off her clothes and humiliate the woman

so grievously that she would be forced to leave the city.

The Shah retreated swiftly to his own box, and sheltered himself behind his entourage. Cora was thrust through a door that led to the stage, and safely hidden until the crowd had left the theatre.

The trouble, however, had not ended at this point. On the following day, a mass of infuriated Frenchmen assembled outside her house, roaring out insults. The police promptly arrested the leaders, and the affair finished with sufficient tameness.

The sequel took the form of a dismissal of Cora from France. People wrote to the authorities demanding her removal. Within a week of the episode at the Opera, she received an official notice to quit.

She was now in a state of great fear. She did not see what was to be the next move. In her anxiety, she sent a messenger for the Shah. However, if Cora had relied upon any wise counsel—any definite assistance from that personage, she was speedily disappointed. For the Shah, on arrival at her house, promptly proceeded to make love to her, refusing to be deflected from his purpose by frantic appeals for counsel. Eventually, he gave her a large sum—and advised her to leave France without protest, pointing out that she could return at a later time when the indignation had died down.

This advice seemed sound to Cora—the money seemed even more convincing. She went to Turin, followed by the Shah, but her stay in that city was brief. The Italian authorities resented her association with the Persian, and again she was asked to go.

After Turin, her record was a record of swift comings



and goings. At Monte Carlo, Cora was dismissed within twenty-four hours of her arrival. At Nice, they endured her for a fortnight—then came the usual polite, but firm, notice to quit. In London, having taken rooms at the Grosvenor Hotel, she was soon met by the manager, who had suddenly discovered that the rooms in question were already engaged . . . Cora moved to a less notable hotel, and remained in London several weeks.

In Milan, to which place she now journeyed, she met her old lover, Rostoff. There was a passage between them, but Rostoff was no longer the fiery lover of former days. There was a deterioration in the beauty of Cora—her life was now beginning to leave the inevitable mark upon her appearance and her health. Rostoff in leaving her assumed a virtuous pose. In a farewell letter, he wrote :

“ In face of duty no hesitation is possible. I make up my mind against you. I have before me a life of labour which must not be frittered away in dissipation. . . . I send you a last gift which may be of service to you. . . .”

Cora now decided to return to Paris. On arriving in that city, she was sensible enough to behave very discreetly for a time, and no objection to her return was put forward by the authorities. It was at this time that Cora made her solitary appearance on the stage. She appeared in the part of “ Cupid,” in a burlesque at the Bouffes Parisiens, but she took little interest in the performance and gave an entirely undistinguished rendering of her part. She had assumed a stage name, but on the twelfth night she was recognized, and was promptly hissed off the stage. She took the incident with her usual



philosophic calm, and that same night gave a supper party, at which she spoke ironically of her experience. "To be applauded madly on one night—and to be shouted down on the next—that is what Fame really means," she told her friends, and then promptly forgot the business and turned her thoughts to new adventures.

\* \* \*

The climax of her career was the affair with the son of M. Duval, the founder of the famous "Duval" restaurants in Paris. The young man having inherited seventeen millions of francs from his father spent the huge sum upon Cora. When nothing was left, and he came to her house, she dismissed him harshly, saying that she was no longer interested in him. The wretched man then used every expedient at his command to raise further funds—resorting to all sorts of desperate endeavours. This money he brought her. After squandering it with her invariable promptness, she again told him to go. When he refused, she actually had the miserable victim turned out by her servants.

Duval came back an hour later—forced his way into the building, and then taking out a revolver, shot himself under the eyes of his mistress. (This episode has been reproduced with exact detail by Zola in his novel *Nana*.) The wound was not serious, and Duval recovered after a short time, cured, let us hope, of his madness. To a reporter Cora exonerated herself, and pleaded that the youth had attempted his life because she had refused to marry him.

\* \* \*

She continued to tread the primrose path. She surrounded herself with absurd luxuries—spent money because she was bored when she was not spending it. She took men, embraced them perfunctorily—held them by a trick of the sense as we have related—and having robbed them of health, money and the desire to live, thrust them aside. She was ruthless as a force of Nature—relentless as a plague. And always she justified herself by saying that men were brutes—mere things of appetite, and that they deserved no consideration from the women who were clever enough to capture the brutes and put chains upon their bodies. . . .

But her power was fading. Lovers were now falling off. There were still men ready to make love to her, but they could not pay the price that she demanded, and she would bate no jot of it. Her dignity was tremendous. She had been accustomed to setting upon herself so high a value that she could not acquiesce in the demands of a falling “market.”

For this woman there could not be, as there had been for other expensive courtesans, a gradual descent by way of cheap lovers to the pavement. She was true to herself in that she would not drift lazily towards a lower level. Rather than do this she decided to sell her possessions and to live upon the money realized by the sale. The house in the Rue Chaillot was sold—furniture, jewels, plate, pictures, horses, carriages—all were marketed, bringing her a very huge sum.

However, although her principal means of living had now failed, and she was forced to rely upon the capital sum realized by the sale of house and other things, she did not attempt to economize. The habit of spending



becomes in time more than a habit—it is an obsession. In a very short time, she had reached a point when economy became a necessity. She took a mean little four-roomed house. The foolish retinue of servants, which in her good days had numbered more than twenty, had now dwindled to two slatternly maids.

She was almost without funds. Bills had accumulated ; she did not know how to pay them. In her misery, Cora wrote to many old friends. Some were dead—some she had ruined and were poor as herself—others had forgotten her. In that evil hour, not one of the long procession of men whom she had known—men who had adored her—came back to bring her assistance. She had roused passion, but never sentiment. She had never given a kiss without payment—had never felt affection for any of the men who had passed through her hands. And so, those men, regarding her as a tradeswoman with whom they had dealings for which they had paid in full, saw no reason why they should trouble their memories and pay out further sums.

It was at this time when Cora was driven to think of many expedients that she conceived the idea of writing her *Memoirs*. She was, however, shrewd enough to recognize that labours of the kind are not highly paid. It was necessary therefore that she should hit upon some means of enhancing their value. To that end, she sent advance sheets of the book to a number of important personages with whom she had dealings. She suggested that the episodes related would be eliminated if the payment were sufficiently good. A specious trick this—blackmail, of course, but the life which she had lived is not a life that induces the higher sentiments.



The trick succeeded. Large sums came to her, and in the result we have a book emasculated and trivial. From the literary point of view, the stuff is appalling. It is dreary, and exceedingly "proper." Although sold for many years in disagreeable little shops haunted by salacious schoolboys and unpleasant old men, it holds nothing in the least degree pornographic. It has, no doubt, afforded disappointment to several generations of seekers after lubricity !

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The money gained by the sale of the *Memoirs* and by the blackmailing of those persons whose names are missing from its pages, did not endure for any length of time. There came the day when Cora Pearl had nothing left save a few dresses—a few cheap trinkets and several hundreds of francs. The rent of the little house was left unpaid, and she went away at night to find a room in the slum street, the Rue de Bassano.

She had been ill for many months. The doctors at the hospital (she could not afford a private doctor), diagnosed cancer, and she suffered the agonies which that disease frequently brings with it. For days and nights she would lie on her bed, speaking to no person, except the woman of the house who brought her her food. Friends of the later days who came to see her were ignored. She had not the spirit to talk of commonplace things. The friends presently fell off, and she said that she was glad to be rid of their troublesome platitudes.

A sentimental biographer has suggested that in those

long hours she must have lain and thought of old glories, of the panoramic lovers who had come and gone, of successes at the gaming tables, of feasts, of the sharp-pointed contrast between the Now and the Then. But it is possible that Cora, unimaginative, with the limited outlook of the woman of the amorous toy shop, did nothing of the kind. It is more probable that she trained her mind on some immediate relief—the coming, perhaps, of a few francs—a gift of fruit or sweets. The true courtesan is to some extent like the animal—she has neither past nor future—she is a creature of the hour—of the minute. . . .

To a relative from England who came to her in the last days of her life, Cora said that she was afraid to die. Sometimes she spoke with remorsefulness of her actions. She begged that a priest might be brought to the house so that she might confess her sins and gain some kind of absolution.

A little time before the priest arrived, she asked for a mirror. The cheap lodging-house room held no hand-mirror—they had to bring her the cracked, creaking looking-glass in a broken frame. When she looked into the glass, she said: “My God! Am I like that?”

The priest came—extreme unction was given her. After the curé had gone, she spoke of her house in the Rue Chaillot, saying she would have liked to see it again for a few minutes. Later, she fell into a stupor, dying in the early hours of the morning of the 8th July, 1886. A swiftly raised subscription furnished by some acquaintances paid for the funeral. The furniture of the wretched room (her last property) was sold, and realized



sufficient money to pay the rent of that room for one week. . . . And that was all that remained of the estate of the woman who had run through a million pounds in less than twenty-five years !

\* \* \*

The death of Cora Pearl passed almost unnoticed by the Press, although she had played a glaring part in the lives of many famous men of the Second Empire. Only one London newspaper, the *Daily News*, gave her a few lines in the news column and a paragraph in an editorial sermonette.

Those who knew this woman have said that she was not beautiful in the classic sense. She was middle-sized, with small eyes of hazel colour that in certain lights seemed pink. She had high cheekbones, a lovely skin, perfect teeth, a round face, reddish hair. This roundness of face and redness of hair gained for her the name of "La Lune Rousse."

Unlike certain of her tribe, she appears to have been a woman of small wit. Of her, no amusing stories are told—she left no "mots" to lighten her sordid record. Her self-esteem was prodigious. In expansive moments she would speak contemptuously of Royal favourites, saying that had she lived in the time of the Du Barrys and the Pompadours, she would have eclipsed them all.

It is hardly probable. She was, perhaps, merely a conscienceless little jade, who with a hard business sense and a genius for animalism, was able to indulge in a form of parasiticism of a peculiarly facile sort. More-



over, she was fortunate in her epoch. For, even if her health and beauty had not failed her, it is hardly probable that she would have carried on her triumphs after the passing of the Empire. She had outlived a mad era. She was an anachronism in the colder and the saner age !

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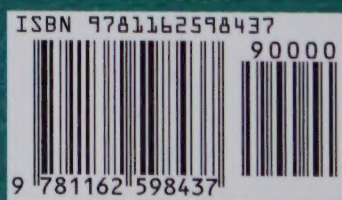












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